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A REALISTIC ROMANCE.

BY

EDGAR FAWCETT,

AUTHOR OF

"An Ambitious Woman," "The Evil that Men Do," Etc.

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A NEW NERO.

PROEM.

The huge building looked so peaceful as Fanshawe drew near it, that for a few moments he found himself scarcely able to realise it was a madhouse. Shaped somewhat fancifully of red brick, with a marked accent of Gothic structure and ornamentation, it rose from an immense lawn shaded by clusters of hardy trees and bearing below its numberless windows flower-beds in radiant bloom. The day was a perfect one in early September; cool winds made silvery tumults in the abundant leafage, and a sky filmed with the most delicate azure haze, wore only a few pearly hints of cloud. Drawing still nearer, the young man perceived that there were signs of life on the charming lawn, and seemingly of a very wholesome sort. To the right stretched a croquet-ground, where a group of men and women were placidly enjoying a game, and while he observed their skilled efforts with mallets and balls, a light peal of laughter made him turn his eyes toward the opposite wing of the imposing pile. Here he perceived the erected nets that told unmistakably of tennis, with players on either side of them wielding bats in evident hearty earnest. All this proved a source of consternation, and yet he suddenly reminded himself that to stand and stare made hardly a graceful beginning for his inquisitive and exploiting visit. He had come to find his uncle, Dr. Theobald, a resident physician at the asylum, and presently

he had proceeded along the broad central path to the spacious doorway, and gained admission.

He had to wait for some little time in a small side chamber off the great, clean-cut, marble-paved hall. The institution was a famous one, radically reconstructed of late on its former site, and teeming with foreign improvements. It rose from a vast meadowy sweep of country in the interior of a New England State. Fanshawe was a young lawyer in a populous town about forty miles away. His uncle, Dr. Theobald, would often appear there, but he himself had never before set foot within even a moderate distance of the great medical refuge.

A reluctance, which cannot be called unhealthy, would have continued to restrain him from coming hither, had it not been for the desire to make certain observations connected with a romance which he was writing in his leisure hours. He had talked over this matter with his uncle, and a cordial invitation had been the result. Soon Dr. Theobald entered and heartily greeted him. He was large and florid and jovial, the last man in the world, you would say, to seek association with deceased and gruesome minds. He was fond of his nephew, and took him about for almost an hour, showing him a good many places and a good many people. The places interested Fanshawe decidedly less than the people. From those who had keepers attending them he may perhaps have expected an occasional little outburst of diverting lunacy. But, old patients and young patients, they nearly all impressed the newcomer as monotonously sane.

"Your accommodations are charming," he at length told his uncle. "Some of the persons to whom you presented me are highly interesting." Here the speaker paused and glanced at his companion with a peculiar, appealing smile. "But so many of them," he resumed, "have in every way looked and acted like mortals of perfect mental soundness, that I really might take them, Uncle Alfred, as corroborations of the plea which I put forward when you came and dined with mother and myself last week at Gleasonbury."

Dr. Theobald's eyes twinkled as he put one hand on Fanshawe's shoulder. "My boy, you should *live* with these poor demented folk to know them! I remember what you said: that there was strong chance always of our incarcerating persons whose reasons had no real flaws. But you have thus far only met, my boy, those who *seem* irrational. If you choose, we will go elsewhere."

Fanshawe did choose, and they passed into remoter regions, where now and then a shriek cleft the air that almost curdled his young blood. He witnessed it all—the pathos of darkened haunts, of padded cells, of straight-jacketed, writhing fellow-creatures who had grown more like wild beasts than men. Quite suddenly, by a devious turn through a low passage-way of vaulted stone, his uncle brought him out on the sunny and breezy tennis-ground, where merry and active players were moving briskly along the trim sward.

"A contrast indeed!" murmured Fanshawe. He felt the least bit giddy for a moment, and caught the trunk of a small maple while he spoke.

His uncle, who was very fond of him, threw an arm about his neck, and they passed the players, re-entering the edifice by another door, vine-clad and picturesque, which led straight to a wide, commodious room, filled with books and beautified by a few rare pictures and statuettes.

"You're unstrung," said Dr. Theobald; "I don't wonder at it in the least." He summoned a servant by a touch on an electric bell, and a luncheon was quickly served, as though it had been waiting their call. Some excellent claret went with it, and possibly the warmth of the wine, relieving Fanshawe's recent faintness, caused him quite boldly to say:

"I've seen some extraordinary contrasts thus far, Uncle Alfred. But, really, my theory of the *possibility* of a sane man or woman being placed and retained in an asylum continues unshaken."

"You mean that they could go on fooling their custodians to the effect that there was a lesion in their wits

when really there was none? Ah, my boy, that's just where you're mistaken! If all the cruel stepfathers and treacherous husbands, and so on, should do their malevolent best in the way of doctors' certificates and mendacious charges, they would not succeed very long when it came to convincing such experts as we have here. For sanity, we all find, is just as hard to conceal as *in*sanity. The first few hours of observation may result in nothing; but live with John, George and Mary, as *we* do, and the truth will crop out one way or another. It's as sure to do so as murder is."

"But murder doesn't always crop out," objected Fanshawe.

"Pretty generally, pretty generally," said Dr. Theobald, in his bland, easeful way.

Soon they revisited the grounds, going into a lovely domain at the rear of the estate, where a kind of pleasaunce had been laid out, full of shaded walks and sprinkled with vine-clad summer-houses. Here they met a few strollers of both sexes, mostly in pairs. Fanshawe had by this time grown accustomed to the placid faces of all those residents whom they thus came upon while out-of-doors.

"I had forgotten to ask you," he at length said to his uncle, "about that brilliant young novelist, Fleming Lancewood. You told me, the other day, that he was here."

"Yes; he is here still, and likely to remain for a good many weeks—if not months."

"He is violent?"

"Not at all. But he is exceedingly mad."

"Incurable, do you think?"

"That is still a doubtful question, I'm sorry to say."

"He is not kept in restraint?"

"Oh, no. I dare say we could find him somewhere. He is watched rather carefully still; but that is all. Would you like to see and talk with him? I think I could readily manage such a little interview, if you chose."

Fanshawe's fair and rather boyish face coloured. He bit his lip troublously. Then, with the gentleness that always marked his manner, he said in somewhat faltering tones:

"Really, Uncle Alfred, I—I should prefer not to see him now. A short time ago it would have given me great delight. I had grown to look on Fleming Lancewood as a master magician in the way of all weirdly imaginative fiction. Nothing that Poe ever wrote, I think, has surpassed his three or four strange, unearthly novels. But you have read them, surely. Everybody has read them."

Dr. Theobald nodded. "Oh, yes; I know them all. As you say, who does not? But always while I gave myself up to their charms, I somehow smelled——" Here the doctor produced a faint but significant sound with his nostrils and ended his sentence by a single, sharp-spoken word—"morphine."

"Ah!" said Fanshawe, "you think it was that?"

"I'm sure it was. He suffered tortures when he was first brought here."

"But I thought," pursued Fanshawe, "that he became crazed from grief at the death of the young girl to whom he was engaged."

"So said the newspapers. And in a manner they may have been right. But men of his youth, his bodily and mental strength, rarely go mad from grief; some violation of the laws of health is usually the true cause of collapse. And that horrible drug, my boy!—it's the most satanic foe of the human intellect that nature has invented. The old Greek gods should have loved it, for whom it would destroy—you know the rest. . . . Ah, Brooke, a message for me?"

These last words were meant for a young man who had just come, with an air of search followed by one of clear relief, down the little rustic, shrub-verged path to the leafy arbour at whose entrance Fanshawe and his uncle had paused. He had some sort of written message in his hand, which the doctor quickly read, dismissing him with a brief verbal response.

"My dear Charley," said Fanshawe's host, as he crumpled the paper annoyedly in one hand, "I am forced to absent myself from you for perhaps a good hour. A new patient has arrived at the asylum, with two attendant physicians.

It's a most important case, and I had every reason not to expect it until to-morrow. Wait for me either here or indoors, my boy, as you desire. Or, if you choose, go into the library, which you have already seen, select a book, and bring it here among the trees to read until my return. I know what a lover of books you are, and how some favourite author will console you for this unintended slight from your fond old uncle. I'll make you more profuse apologies later ; it's really too bad ; they're waiting for me, confound 'em !"

Dr. Theobald now warmly pressed his nephew's hand, and almost before Fanshawe had quite realised that he was to be left alone, he found himself seated upon one of the arbour benches, listening to the breezy rustle of its vine-leaves with a sudden peculiar sense of solitude.

It was not an agreeable sense. The young man had what is called a nervous temperament, and all the idyllic charm of his surroundings could not quiet a restless memory of grim sights lately beheld. Then, too, these murmurous groves were no Arcady in which one might expect only to meet the votaries of peace and love. Fanshawe had an uncomfortable feeling that some decidedly Dantesque spirits might walk here. And yet, when he presently heard a step as of some one approaching, he was beset by a curiosity that oddly consorted with his dread. Straightway both were intensified ; for while the face that soon dawned upon him roused his interest in strong degree, it seemed also as if prepared to prove the cause of certain chilling surprises. Not that it looked by any means like the face of a madman ; but it was excessively melancholy, and that it should be here at all in this wood, was a fact freighted with but one dark sort of inference.

The stranger saw Fanshawe between little green-wreathed apertures of the arbour, and greeted him with a sombre bow. There is every chance that while he returned this bow the flesh of its recipient slightly crept.

"It's a very beautiful day, is it not ? Have you been here long ?"

Addressed in these words, Fanshawe was startled by their gentleness of tone and culture of utterance. As the man

now paused before him, in open view, at the threshold of the summer-house, his haggard features, cut in lines of poetic beauty and delicacy, implied both despondence and distress.

"I am only a visitor at the—the establishment," replied Fanshawe, thanking his lucky stars that he had saved himself in time from calling it "the asylum."

"Ah, indeed! Only a visitor?"

Fanshawe now felt as if he could bite his tongue out for having thus pointedly suggested that he was not insane.

His new companion soon entered the summer-house and dropped into a seat directly opposite him. Fanshawe perceived that this tall figure had a loose, wearied air in all its limbs; and something like a fatigued sigh faintly escaped him just before he continued to speak.

"You are fortunate in *being* only a visitor. It is a horribly monotonous place to live in. I feel, for my part, that an attractive prison is always the most unbearable kind. Among the cells and courtyards of an actual jail, captives can see liberty only in their dreams. Here one is constantly reminded of it through the most appealing agencies."

"True," replied Fanshawe, while at the same time telling himself that no man ever looked and acted saner than did this one, notwithstanding the gravity of his bearing and the enkindled, hectic, yet wholly self-controlled quality of his dark-grey eyes. "Still, the largeness and comfort of a place like this," he went on, "should surely be a consolation rather than a fresh cause of dejection. And besides, is not there always the hope of freedom with returned health?"

"Returned health?" came the answer, while their lids drooped for an instant over the speaker's rich-lit eyes. "For me there is no such hope, since no cerebral disease which any physician could lay his scientific finger upon, has ever in the least afflicted me."

"No? Really?" fell from Fanshawe. He was thinking of something that his uncle had not long ago said to him. "Almost every one of them," Dr. Theobald had declared, "will tell you that he or she is entirely sound of mind, and

to this rule you will be sure to find an amazingly small percentage of exceptions."

Like a dissenting protest against this recollected statement sounded the next words of the man who now faced Fanshawe.

"Oh, I know very well of what you are thinking," he quietly said. "It's this: All here have the same grievance; their minds are not affected, and they have been wrongfully treated by this assumption on the part of their guardians and physicians. Now I am prepared freely to admit that in a certain way I am insane."

"Yes? You admit that?" said Fanshawe, fascinated and not a little bewildered.

"Oh, yes. But I maintain that with me there has been (except briefly) no delusion—no hallucination. Whatever weakness may exist in my brain has been congenital. I was, in other words, born the murderer that you now behold me."

So tranquil was the delivery of this astounding admission that its hearer seemed at first hardly stirred by it. Then a rush of consternation besieged him.

"You a murderer!" he exclaimed. "No, no! If you were indeed what you call yourself, you certainly would not be allowed——"

"This relative kind of freedom?" A smile of forlorn irony touched those pale and pure-cut lips. "It is because they will not credit the existence of my crimes—because they insist on assuming I am an innocent man, haunted by a mythical belief in the perpetration of them—that this species of durance is given me instead of death upon the scaffold."

Fanshawe felt the colour fade from his cheeks. Here must indeed be the self-betrayal of dementia to which his uncle had lately with such confidence referred. And yet somehow those words of Hamlet to the Queen now swept with curious aptness through his mind:

> "It is not madness
> That I have uttered; bring me to the test,
> And I the matter will re-word; which madness
> Would gambol from."

Forcing himself to seem quite composed, although inwardly much excited, Fanshawe now said :

"But surely, even if you have committed these crimes, ought you not to feel that you are treated with a most refreshing leniency ? "

"The leniency is in my case not refreshing. I prefer to meet death."

"You prefer it ? "

"Infinitely."

"Do you mean because of"—Fanshawe hesitated here, and then finished with the one word—"remorse ? "

"Yes," was the answer, softly and musingly given. "I have violated the Fifth Commandment six different times, and yet I have never felt the faintest thrill of remorse. But with the seventh violation it was different. The emotion had till then been quite unknown to me." This and the succeeding sentences were spoken without a hint of affectation ; sincerity itself seemed to dwell in every syllable. "My name is Harold Mountstuart. You may have heard it before. Not very long ago I fear that it must have been connected with a homicidal scandal. I insisted upon my own guilt, but for some absurd reason my affirmations were discredited and I was adjudged insane. Since then I have longed to establish some sort of belief among my fellowmen that I should be tried as a criminal and not kept imprisoned like this, as a semi-imbecile. I am perfectly prepared to meet my fate. It is far better than the fatigue of incessant immurement. My last murder was a mistake, you see. I meant to kill a certain woman who stood between myself and the perfect attainment of a certain end. In place of her I killed, however——"

Here the speaker abruptly paused. Fanshawe noted that his fine eyes were suddenly blurred as if by a soft rush of unshed tears.

"I—I killed, instead," he now brokenly continued, "the only woman whom I had ever loved. Nay, I should say more : she was the only living creature for whom I had ever felt the least shadow of human affection. I killed her, as I said, by mistake. This crime makes me anxious to face,

as its atonement, a public execution. I assure you, my dear sir, that nothing would give me greater delight than to feel the noose about my neck, and to realise that I was about to pay the memory of this lovely woman some distinct expiatory tribute!"

Poor Fanshawe gnawed his lips as the deep and earnest voice now ceased. Grotesquely repellent though this Harold Mountstuart's avowals had struck him, their complete freedom from rant, incoherence, or disjointed expression had put him in a mood to scoff the idea of their having sprung from distempered faculties. The hideous immorality so serenely disclosed woke his abhorrence, while at the same time it roused in him an uncanny fascination. For his life, Fanshawe could not just then have pronounced the man a lunatic. Verisimilitude clothed him like a garment. What if Dr. Theobald and all the others—magnates both of medicine and law—had in this one instance grievously erred? Of course Fanshawe admitted to himself, in swift introspection, that he was both young and inexperienced. But youth had its intuitions, he as rapidly ruminated, and even inexperience had its freedoms from professional prejudice.

"I think, Mr. Mountstuart," he said, with some tremor of tone, "that your desire for death (provided you lack faith in any future punishment) is not at all to be wondered at. But of course I can't aid you in the strange purpose of dying publicly and disgracefully—or in dying at all, for that matter. I can only pity you as a person born with neither feeling nor conscience. But, if you choose, I will speak to my uncle, Dr. Theobald, whose guest I now am, and beg him more closely to investigate your case."

"Do so! do so, by all means!" was the eager response. "But before you take the least action, my dear sir, pray let me beg of you to read this." He drew forth a packet of papers, flexible and of no great bulk, handing it to Fanshawe while he glanced over one shoulder with the air of having heard some unpleasing sound. In another moment Fanshawe had taken the paper, and just as he had fairly

done so a male figure came strolling along the adjacent path.

Mountstuart rose, with a glance at the intruder at once nervous and austere.

"Oh, it's you?" he said, in grim semi-tone. Then he turned toward Fanshawe, who had already scanned a clean-shorn, stolid visage, which he promptly divined to be that of a keeper. By this time Fanshawe had also risen. "You want me for something, I suppose?" said Mountstuart to the man, with haughty peevishness.

"It's time for your nap, sir, if you can get it, for you slep' pretty poor last night. And it's medicine-time, too."

"Nap—medicine?" repeated Mountstuart, throwing back his dark, classic head with a majestic sort of fatigue. He recast a sudden look upon Fanshawe and his face drearily brightened. "If you will only read that!" he exclaimed, though in a half-smothered voice, too low for the keeper's ears. "It's the history of my life. I've written it out with extreme care. It tells everything. It may force you to see just how ridiculously merciful they have been to me. Keep it—don't think of returning it. Use it, if you can and will. Use it in what I should call my behalf—in bringing me to judgment, to justice, to the shameful execution which *her* death—hers alone out of all the seven!—has caused me stubbornly to crave. You will find it a wonderful story. It will read like some weird romance. But ponder it a little, and the truth of it will creep like flame into your spirit. Then I shall expect you to help me—*you know how and whither.*" He turned and joined his attendant, coolly refusing the sturdy arm offered him. His profile, as he moved away, dwelt long afterward in Fanshawe's dreams; its beauty, powerful as though every feature were moulded from bronze, wore such desolation blended with thoughtfulness and such mockery blended with despair!

Opening the manuscript, Fanshawe soon found that it was of far greater length than he might have inferred. The paper was thin and very pliant, while the handwriting was unusually small and close. But this latter was also as regular and readable as print, marked by exquisite neatness

and showing only an occasional erasure. He sank back into the seat which he had just quitted there in the arbour, and soon became deeply absorbed, reading, with much speed and with many dismayed thrills—

THE STORY OF HAROLD MOUNTSTUART'S LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THIS is the autobiography of a man who saw between himself and a large fortune seven human lives, and who resolved, with cold deliberation, to murder his way slowly and surely past them all, until the fortune became his own.

It is no merely lurid tale of vulgar assassination. It is rather one which exhibits crime, I should say, in the light of a subtle and picturesque art, like that of the lapidary, the silversmith, or the painter on ivory. It attempts to point no moral, and yet an august and pregnant moral is manifest at its end.

The Mountstuarts of Devonshire belong to one of the oldest families in England. Nearly all my early life was passed in a charming yet unpretentious home just overlooking those delightful downs which in turn survey the scintillant waters of the Channel. My father died when I was very young, and I have only the dimmest recollection of him. My mother was a fair, tall woman, with no beauty to speak of, but a strongly patrician bearing. She had been the daughter of a poor Irish earl, and had married my father, as I afterward learned, with the expectation of having him succeed to great wealth. But of this hereafter.

As a young boy, I recall myself caring for play and sport, while somewhat disdaining study. I had a sister, named Gladys, who was very fond of me, who was three years older than I, and who petted and caressed me with warm extravagance. Between myself and my tutors she would often genially intercede. I am sure that they did not find me

stupid, though they often chid me for laziness and inattention. One day, having returned from a romp with some playmates (how distinctly I remember this day !), I took up a volume of Euclid with reluctance and disgust, feeling that I must master two or three of its initial propositions for the morrow. Algebra had hitherto been the one study which attracted me. But on a sudden, Euclid produced in me a distinct captivation. I mastered my lesson so well that, next day, my teacher was delighted. The whole ratiocinative scheme of the work appealed to me thenceforward with striking clearness. Some sort of door seemed to have been opened in my mind. Reason, for the first time, vividly woke within my brain, and by the light it shed I seemed to gaze with new eyes upon all other forms of intellectual pursuit. My tutors praised me to my mother, who smiled approval upon me with her faded, chilly lips. But my sister Gladys overwhelmed me with kisses and gratulations. The kisses I never returned, and the gratulations I accepted as if they had been an offering not less commonplace than my dinner or my weekly pocket-money. I recollect that Gladys at this time was a beautiful young girl, blonde like her mother, and with eyes full of liquid amber lights.

Earlier than most boys make their advent thither I was sent to Eton. But before I had been many months on the banks of the historic Thames, and in sight of stately Windsor, the news of my sister's sudden illness called me once more to my Devonshire home. I reached it to find that Gladys had just died of a heart trouble wholly unforeseen and fearfully acute.

Looking upon her white, still, virginal face, I realised for the first time the meaning of death. My mother stood beside me while I gazed at my sister, and I saw that her eyes were streaming with tears. I wondered how she could weep like that. Then I recollected that it was because of love. For myself, I could not have shed a tear if untold rewards had been promised me. I pictured my mother, lying lifeless and inert, just as Gladys lay. Could I weep for *her?* No, came the inward answer. Could I weep for

any one who should thus pass into nullity? No, no. And then, in those hours of what we call household grief, it became plain to me that I had never felt the most shadowy impulse of sentiment or affection for any one with whom thus far I had been brought into contact.

Would I ever feel such impulse? In asking myself this question I seemed to knock at the door of my own heart, and to receive a hollow yet confirmative echo.

Was I then what the world would call an anomaly, an abnormal creation, a flesh-and-blood monster? By degrees I became convinced that this was thoroughly true. If the world knew me as I knew myself it would shrink from me as one, in a psychic sense, leprous. For co-existent with this coldness I discovered that my nature was impregnated by a strange ethical torpor. The closer that I examined my whole inward being, the more positive I grew that everything like moral sympathy had been denied me. Fear of the contempt of my fellow-creatures alone kept me from doing what must have soiled my repute. Not that I failed to understand how society is only held together by an observance of duteous and restrictive laws. My scientific and "agnostic" reading had taught me that. In some other age it is possible that I might have been devoutly orthodox, with a conscience that would have made me miserable if I had wounded a fly. But I chanced to be one of those whom the onward march of rationalistic thought maims rather than strengthens. Right for the sake of right had no appeal to me. As I lost faith in the existence of a conscious Deity, with powers alike of punishment and reward, I began to regard life as the most empty and aimless of travesties. I cannot explain this effect, I can only record if. Doubtless, however, my final discountenance of all religion merely meant the ultimate stimulus toward that course of callous egotism which I was fated so unswervingly to pursue.

There are some men, I am well aware, in whom the destruction of world-worn creeds can produce a splendid spiritual expansion. Virtue becomes an even more stringent obligation with them because they can now hold it as

the product of their own volition, their individual promptings of mingled expediency and wisdom. But I was cast in a different mould. In me the haters of freethought would have found a monumental example of its harms. But now, looking back on my unparalleled career, I cannot allow that they would have fairly judged. All push of progress is partially destructive. Its chariot-wheels move forward to new goals, but in so moving they crush. I was one of those whom the doctrines of what I firmly believe advancement and enlightenment, had not helped but hindered.

People liked me ; I was indeed popular. I often passed as a person of much heart and feeling. By the time I had left Eton and entered Cambridge I found that I had made numerous friends. Cunning enabled me to mimic emotions by which I was never visited—pity, charity, generosity, affection, kindliness. Withal, I had what is termed an even temperament ; amiable smiles and glances were natural to me, and bursts of ill-humour never marred my manners. Behind all this lay within my soul, as it were, a frigid polar tract of egotism and ambition. I was secretly very jealous of certain associates whose prospects brightly outcoloured my own. It seemed to me that money was the chief desirable object of attainment ; I wanted a large fortune more than any other conceivable thing. Fame and honour struck me as ridiculous ; they took such an enormous amount of effort in the gaining of them, and when the gain arrived one was often ready for one's grave. In college I was thought brilliant, and secured credit for more ability than I put forth. All studies came easy to me, and I often wondered at the dulness of my co-disciples. But I was lazy, having that voluptuously indolent streak which is so apt to accompany great selfishness. Personally, as I well knew, my attractions increased. Of just the proper height, with symmetric build, delicate hands and feet, and a face full of intelligence and charm, I one day intently studied myself in the mirror of my bedchamber at Cambridge, and concluded that my physical gifts, added to the vantage of excellent birth, should enable me to make an important marriage.

Not long afterward, while I was at home during one of my vacations, this idea was openly seconded by my mother.

But already it had grown nauseous to me. All the winsome young women whom I met pleased me more or less alike. But marriage pointed to a distressing captivity. I craved riches without marrying to secure them, and the fact of this longing had begun to irk me with a conception of how impracticable were its foundations. For surely it mated ill with the lazy and pleasure-loving trend to which I have just referred.

"No," I now said to my mother. "The plan of selling myself to a woman for so many pounds per annum doesn't suit me at all."

My mother looked at me fixedly for a moment with her dimmed eyes. I felt certain that she knew me better than did any other living being; but at the same time I felt equally certain that her knowledge of me was partial and vague.

"It often crosses my mind, Harold, that you will not fall in love. And yet it's absurd to prophesy about matters like these. On the other hand, you might marry very comfortably by selecting some young heiress who cared a great deal for you. I have known happy marriages where the love was all on one side. In such cases, of course, there must be constancy, and, indeed, a certain loyalty from the one who receives passion but gives none in return."

"Admirable arrangement," I laughed. "But doubtless I should prove both inconstant and disloyal. By the way," I here pursued, "was your marriage with my father one of sentiment or convenience? You've never told me."

My mother drew herself up for an instant, and in a way that made me comprehend just why Lady Ida Mountstuart had been so frequently called a supercilious woman. But her manner soon softened again; since the death of Gladys her proud moods had grown more and more rare.

"It was a marriage of both sentiment *and* convenience, Harold. I was very fond of your father, but I could not

shut my eyes to the fact of his heirship to a half-million of pounds."

"A half-million of pounds!"

"That is the fortune now held by your uncle, Malcolm Mountstuart, of Graydon Hall, Derbyshire."

"My father's brother," I said. "But he has children, and so has my other uncle, Cecil Mountstuart, at Cleeve Lodge, in Essex."

"True. Both are now widowers and with children that are almost grown up; but when I married your father, the third of the three brothers, they were both unmarried."

"Ah, yes," came my reply. "I remember your telling me that they married sisters."

"Yes. It was a great *coup* of that famous London match-maker, Lady Huntingdon. She had two girls left on her hands, nearly dowerless and with not a ray of good looks. Nobody dreamed any longer that the Mountstuart brothers meant to marry. Your father's health was excellent then, and between himself and this pair of confirmed bachelors an interval of over ten years existed. Everything pointed to but one result. Those marriages dealt us a bitter blow."

"Is Uncle Malcolm's fortune entailed?" I presently asked.

"No."

"But his son, Egerton, will get it all, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"And if young Egerton were to die without marrying——"

"It would go to his sister, Blanche, naturally."

"And if anything should happen to Blanche, the next heir would be old Uncle Cecil. And after him that queer little hunchback cousin of mine, Angus. And if Angus were to go, it would fall to the elder of those twins—or perhaps Angus would divide it equally between Edna and Olive, considering that there is no entail, and the family would all be extinct—all, that is, except—except—myself——"

"Harold!" exclaimed my mother, as if startled by the fall, dreamy and half audible, that my voice had taken, "what on earth *are* you saying?"

"Nothing," I returned. Then I laughed, and gave my head a careless toss. "It's hard luck to have seven people stand between you and half a million pounds."

"Envy is an idle pursuit, Harold. No earthly good ever comes of it."

"Oh, I was not envying any one."

"Were you not? I am glad of that. We must accept destiny. To do otherwise is to beat the air."

"Yes," I answered, "you're right, beyond the faintest doubt."

"Seven," I kept thinking, nevertheless. The numeral haunted me. "Seven, seven." It rang in my brain for days, for weeks. I had no idea why it did so. Envy was, of course, a kind of reason, after all. But was there any other? Envy and avarice are near kindred. Oh, yes, I was avaricious, too. But even the greed which I felt for that fortune, snatched from me by fate, did not explain another mood of secret and darksome rumination. What was that mood? It crept over me at times, as a fog creeps over a landscape. And just as we will now and then see in the rolling volumes of such vapour fantastic shapes, or similitudes of shapes, I would now and then find myself staring at a Visage, shadowy and yet appalling real. Still, it did not appal me over-greatly. It failed, in any acute sense, to start a single nerve. I stared on, so to speak, month after month, more fascinated than repelled, more diverted than shocked. And slowly it became plain to me that a certain inner chamber of the soul had been made ready, as with grim hospitality, for some sort of unnameable guest. If I trembled at all, it was with expectation, not fear. On the hearthstone of that mystic chamber I kindled with steady hand my noxious little blaze of welcome, and within its four sombre walls I lit no less calmly my drowsy but baleful lamp.

CHAPTER II.

In the same year that I was graduated from Cambridge my mother died, after a brief illness. I was already possessed of a thousand pounds a year, besides the small estate in Devonshire called Dyandotte. My mother's death now gave me a thousand pounds more of income. Considering that I had a marked leaning toward scholarly and scientific pursuits, my financial status was now thought highly comfortable. But only those who knew me best were aware of my love for luxury and fine living. Excess, dissipation, was repulsive to me, but daintiness and splendour were deeply valued. I longed to own a superb library ; the collection of books at Dyandotte was both limited and inferior. I had a taste for modish equipages and a stable handsomely stocked ; in these respects my old home was poverty itself. I craved the elegances of sumptuous furniture, silverware, glassware, upholstery, and all that makes an abode pleasing both to dwell in one's self and to exhibit with furtive pride for the admiration of others. I yearned for a house in London, where I could pass the season when I chose, and I wanted it to be a mansion noble as any in Grosvenor Square or Portland Place. I loved precious stones, and had acquired a rather remarkable knowledge of them. I had a sensuous passion for flowers, and would have delighted in cultivating the choicest exotics to which artifice could lend its most persuasive tropic heats. And here I must beg the reader to pardon me for this exposition of a pagan voluptuousness at which I have already more than hinted.

The digression now made is founded upon no desire to excuse my subsequent acts, but rather to place them properly against that background except for whose accessories they cannot be viewed with the impartial fairness that all our human acts deserve, whether vile or saintly, beneficent or corrupt. Music had almost from babyhood enticed me, and I was now a passably good performer on the piano and violin. Of the latter instrument I was indeed a warm devotee if not an actual master. I found myself envying the King of

Bavaria because of what he had done for Wagner, whose genius I adored. But music, profoundly as it stirred me, meant an intellectual and not a spiritual thirst. I had read what that terrible arch-doubter, Schopenhauer, says about it, and for myself, as for him, its richest and subtlest eloquence conveyed one constant message of irony and despair. In all its countless rhythms and cadences it was always an expression of our own empty and futile mortality, of the mere masque of shades that we could so justly be called, of that soulless and mysterious will-to-live, which for ever creates, protects, and perpetuates, though blindly and dumbly, unconscious that she does either. Music would speak to me half in tones of tragedy, half in tones of splendid materialism. Since it could tell me nothing of another world, it would often tell me delicious and tempting things of this. There are several bars in one of Beethoven's sonatas that I could never play or hear played without feeling near me the palpable presence of a certain type of womanhood, and being conscious that a peculiar fleshly odour, mixed with that of dishevelled hair, floated to my nostrils. Though I would not have dared openly to say so, the character of Nero had always been to me one that teemed with sinister charm. I loved to read of his boundless wealth, and the imperial laxity with which he spent it. The account of his having smothered a bevy of fellow-banqueters by a sudden rain of roses from the ceiling, always made my blood tingle.

For poetry alone, of all the arts, I had not a gleam of regard. Both in classic and modern tongues I failed to reap from it the slightest enjoyment. Straight along, from Homer to Tennyson, it was contemptible and absurd. A great deal of it was like the merest jargon to me; the emotion, the enthusiasm, the rapture, the sublimity, was to my thinking so much buncombe and tirade. Milton, when I could understand him (for the instant words were metrically arranged they had the trick of baffling my comprehension), amused me with the pungency of a parody; I found myself calling his Satan a pompous poser and his Gabriel a periphrastic bore. Even Shakespeare struck me as tedious,

though some of his characters, like Iago and a few others, affected me far beyond the rest. Hamlet I abhorred for his vacillation and assumed madness, Macbeth for his superstition, cowardice, and weakness of resolve. I instance my unreceptive condition with regard to poetry because I hold it, in these confessions, an important item of disclosure. Even before my twentieth year I had too heedfully analysed the forces of my own intelligence not to admit that here was a woeful discrepancy, a vacuous deficit, since poetry, as I could clearly apprehend without feeling it, is by necessity king of the arts, at once combining what is best in each and reigning over them all by the right of this comprehensive kinship.

For a number of months after my mother's death I lived quietly at Dyandotte. Here I fitted up a laboratory, knowing well that chemical pursuits and experiments would always be dear to me, as indeed was almost every other branch of science. I purchased some fine electrical instruments too, and some optical ones of equal worth. For a time I assured myself that to live here in the drowsy and yet salubrious air of dear old Devon, seeking for new revelations from the chill yet not churlish lips of that one oracle whose answers I credited, would be to garner more actual gain than any which worldly and social distinction could bestow. Confident of making certain precious discoveries as the years flowed on, why should I not find in the cult of pure knowledge a gratification for those lusts and longings of an egotism which I had now learned to be colossal? By degrees all other desires would crumble into the ashes of their previous ardour, and I would reach that stage of experience when one marvels at the vanished strength of purposes which long ago have perished.

But this mood was fated not to last. I had always been on friendly terms with the families of both my uncles. These had come in conclave to my mother's funeral, and before departing from Dyandotte the head of either house had cordially invited me to visit them. Since then Uncle Malcolm had written me two or three urgent invitations to stay with him at Graydon Hall, and at last I determined

that a sojourn there should mark, as it were, my re-emergence into the live and active world.

I had seen this beautiful country-seat several times before, but the amplitude of its magnificent park and the majesty of its Norman edifice, many-turreted and wide-sweeping, had never so strongly impressed me as now. The autumn day on which I arrived at Graydon was bland and sunny, but not more so than the greetings which I received from its three principal inmates. And here within doors, what blended grandeur and ease! We often hear of the perfection to which life has been brought in the best English country houses. Malcolm Mountstuart passed his days in this ancestral home not merely like a nabob, but like a man of infinite sense as well. There was no over-opulence of gorgeous trappings, but there was everywhere faultless comfort, convenience, and taste. Quite a large house-party had already assembled, and among these were three or four of the loveliest girls in England. I admired them excessively; the lights and shades on their delicate faces, the movements of their shapely bodies, the melody of their modulated voices—all this woke in me genuine delight. But there it ended: these charming creatures had no power to weave over me that one spell which has for centuries been called divine. The fever and transport of passion I could comprehend; the meaning of love wholly baffled me.

My cousin, Egerton, now at Oxford, was a shy, awkward lad, immensely courted because of his prospects, and bearing ill the onus of importance which had befallen him. Blanche, still a mere slip of a girl, was slender and somewhat sallow, with languorous manners and a tendency, as I soon concluded, to strike sentimental attitudes. The rest of the company were people of fashion, or of note in the political world—altogether a most briliant assemblage, high-bred, impertinent, indolent, and perhaps more than a trifle wicked.

The enchantment of the whole noble interior wrought upon me with telling emphasis. Gay and amusing as I appeared, no one in that great house, full of pleasure-loving people, dreamed that I nourished the dark project which

now had taken hold of me. The dreams of a philosophic life at Dyandotte had become permanently shattered. This lordly dwelling, I decided, might within a relatively brief time become my own. Even while I sat among the guests there at Graydon, with a laugh or a jest on my lips, I was thinking of how I could push my way, by consummate and infernal tact, toward the mastership of this grand possession.

The course of action which I intended to employ now occupied many reflective hours. I coolly meditated upon my list of victims. They were seven:

1st. My uncle, Malcolm Mountstuart.
2nd. His son, Egerton.
3rd. His daughter, Blanche.
4th. His brother, Cecil Mountstuart.
5th. Angus, son of the preceding.
6th and 7th. The twin sisters of Angus, Edna and Olive.

I am aware that merciful people will pronounce any such purpose, entering the mind of a man reared in codes of modern culture and habituated to the decrees of modern civilisation and refinement, insanity pure and simple. But this charge, whether potential or actual, I absolutely deny. Contemporary annals of society bristle with records of crime. I could quote hundreds of cases where assassination has been deliberately performed. None of these, if you choose, is so audaciously and abominably flagrant as my own. But wherever we can find evidence of a murder that has been coldly plotted and carefully carried out, there, I insist, is the semblance of that larger iniquity into which I chose to plunge. Of course I admit that all homicidal instinct is, in a way, insanity. But so long as the would-be murderer feels, as I felt, that his destructive impulse can be controlled at will, the enormous potency of heredity and of physiological lesion must be alone blamed for his misdeed. In *that* sense I would most gladly grant that all crime is of insane origin. Change the brain of a Guiteau by almost inappreciable degrees, and it might become the brain of a patriot or a saint.

This point of view is my only vantage-ground of justifica-

tion. And yet I desire no such palliative. It must already have clearly been understood by the reader of these reckless and uncompromising memoirs that I state fact and disdain self-excuse. What I was, I was. To declare that I could help being what I was is to drop a plummet within the mighty mystery of so-called free-will. And who of all the greatest thinkers has ever yet been able to tell us that we are free agents, untrammelled by the tyrannous cause-and-effect which means but a series of links backward from to-day through countless phases of earthly existence?

My uncle Malcolm was a man of the world, and a very attractive one. To murder him would be difficult, chiefly because of his admirable health. At home in Dyandotte I had poisons that would work quickly. But there is a great deal of nonsense talked about poisons whose track is undiscoverable. Uncle Malcolm must undoubtedly be my stepping-stone, my beginning. But I had not the vaguest intention of becoming a bungling assassin. On the contrary, I meant to make myself a phenomenally adroit one. My uncle was also a man of pleasure, with many follies and few graver faults. An indulgent father, a warm and generous friend, easily moved to charity, though often forgetful of others' needs until reminded of them, he had the kind of character which creates popularity, if it does not waken esteem. Surely in killing him I could not help feeling that there were many whom the world could more easily have spared.

For several days I brooded, when alone, upon just the method that it would be safest to adopt. In all these seven future crimes I must not merely defy detection, I must destroy it. The simple fact of my reaching the inheritance through seven successive deaths would naturally excite suspicion unless I were cautious beyond words. What happened to each of my victims must happen in such a way that no one could possibly accuse me of his or her death unless by doing so the accuser covered himself with ridicule.

At length my plan grew plain to me. Uncle Malcolm kept late hours, and yet, as he openly confessed, always read himself to sleep, no matter how long after midnight he

retired. His servant had orders to place a candelabrum at his bedside, which he himself would light on entering his bed. Nothing could be more natural than that he should fall asleep over his book, and that the wind from a casement not far away should cause one of the candles to blow a flame perilously near the large tester which overshadowed him. His apartments were near my own, opening off from the large second main hall of the building. I found out that his valet left him ten or fifteen minutes after he entered his chambers. I had grown very intimate with him, had seen the candelabrum which he employed, and had noted the window which he laughingly boasted of keeping unclosed at nearly all seasons. This was so near his bed that my exclamation of surprise at his imprudence caused no surprise.

"Oh, yes, Harold, I'm a tremendous lover of fresh air."

"But the draught, uncle?"

"There isn't any draught. The wind sometimes blows pretty hard into the room, but its current is stopped by the shut doors."

"What," I urged, "if those draperies over your bed should catch fire from the candles you place so near it?"

Uncle Malcolm laughed again. He was standing near the bed as he spoke, and seized one of its falls of tapestry, giving the antique, brocaded breadth a careless toss.

"Oh, no danger, my boy. True, I hate the mouldy old rags, but I let them stay. They're a bit of our Mountstuart history, you know. After the battle of Barnet, King Edward the Fourth slept, they say, in this very bed. The next morning he offered our ancestor, Guy Mountstuart, an earldom, which was refused."

"I remember that our family refused an earldom in 1471," I answered. It seemed to me detestable, just then, that a title should not be included in the wealth I was plotting to attain.

Dinner at Graydon Hall was the event of the day. My uncle rode, played billiards, drove, bored himself with matters that concerned his estate, now and then tried his skill at chess, and often flirted immoderately, from morning

until the hour for dinner. Indisputably old, he yet bore himself like a man of forty. "My brother Cecil," he would say to me, "is five years my junior, and yet he lives there at his place in Essex with his hunchback boy and his twin daughters, Edna and Olive, as though he had one foot in the grave and nearly half of the other. I'm a deal more sensible. I recognise the absurdity of not amusing one's self. My views may be heathenish, but I can recall a number of heathens who squeezed some rather palatable juice from this queer orange of existence, after all."

Throughout the day we guests at Graydon did as we pleased. Often I would not see my uncle for hours, and entire seclusion, if I chose, was possible. But at dinner we arrayed ourselves as if for a ball, and every dinner was a banquet of princely grandeur. Late in the evening those who cared to do so would assemble in the smoking-room, an enchanting Elizabethan chamber, low-ceiled, with mullioned windows that gave upon a garden full of hollyhocks and chrysanthemums. On the night when I intended to kill my uncle it happened that by twelve o'clock only three men besides him and myself had remained in the smoking-room. I had procured from two different chemists in the neighbouring village two separate sleeping potions, each in itself a large dose. These I had combined, and I meant, if I could, to slip their colourless and comparatively tasteless powder into one of my uncle's late potions of Scotch whisky and soda-water. The three men who still lingered in their commodious chairs gave quiet threats of indefinitely remaining. But at last they betook themselves away, and my uncle and I were left alone together. I felt almost certain that he would desire more to drink before going upstairs. He had been grouse-shooting half the day, and had plainly sought to relieve fatigue by copious draughts of wine at dinner. Indeed, he was visibly affected by what he had already drank; his florid face was almost encrimsoned, and his speech, though unwontedly glib, was a trifle thick. If he had really been intoxicated nobody would have cared or commented. He was a man who did, in all matters of personal deportment, precisely as he chose, and his great

position, added to his native reckless and debonair audacity, successfully challenged scandal.

"Ralph Southbrook ought to be ashamed of himself to leave us like this, Harold, my boy," he exclaimed, when the last guest had departed. "The idea of that fellow talking about his liver! I'm old enough to be his father, and I'll wager that I'll get on my horse to-morrow morning and join the meet at Haddiscombe without the ghost of a headache." I looked at my uncle while he thus spoke. He sat in a great leathern chair, puffing clouds of smoke from a choice cigar. Behind him loomed a massive sideboard, loaded with glass and silver. Above the sombre wainscot, just over his grey, fluffy-haired head, gleamed an old portrait of a Mountstuart by Van Dyke, with a ruff and a pointed beard. I watched him in silence for a few seconds, as one might watch a painting of some jolly old wassailer by Rembrandt or Rubens.

"You will never get on your horse again," I said to myself. "In a very short time from now you will no longer be alive."

CHAPTER III.

"Upon my word," I said gaily aloud to my uncle, "Lord Southbrook's departure hasn't by any means plunged me in gloom. One does get so tired of grunted sneers at the existing government from a man who hasn't brains enough either to speak or write his opinions, notwithstanding that he's an hereditary legislator. May I fill your glass, uncle? Yes? Don't rise. I will get everything you wish."

My uncle broke into a genial, permissive laugh. He was in one of his mellowest and heartiest moods, poor man! I wondered, as I went to the sideboard and arranged his drink for him, why I could not find it in my composition to give him, at least, the tribute of a pitying pang.

"This surely must be your 'night-cap,' uncle," I said, as I handed him the glass into which I had emptied my narcotic powder. "Vigorous as you are, that hunt to-

morrow will tax your energies. It's marvellous, remember, that a man of your years should be able to follow the hounds at all. And as for your reading in bed to-night, pray let me counsel you not to do so. Mr. Maurayne's advice this evening was highly sensible; I only wish you would profit by it."

I had managed, about an hour ago, to turn the conversation upon the subject of Uncle Malcolm's bad habit of reading himself to sleep, and I had specially referred to the danger he ran in placing the candelabrum so near the bed. Some treated the matter humorously, but the guest whom I have mentioned took a serious view of it.

The friendly scolding he had given my uncle, however, was wholly wasted. Malcolm Mountstuart was not to be reprimanded out of doing precisely as he pleased.

"My dear Harold," he now said, as he began to sip the potion I had prepared for him, "your solicitude is really captivating. Egerton would not think of taking so much interest in me; though, Heaven knows, I've never shown him the faintest semblance of the British father's traditional severity. You'll not drink anything more yourself?"

"No, thanks, uncle."

"You're very right, my boy. I really feel that I've drifted into taking a glass too much at night when I'm down here in the country. The fact is, London, when one's there in the season, gives one such a lot to do that one forgets—— There's a queer taste, somehow, about this tipple. A kind of—of salty taste."

I had been standing at his side while he thus spoke. I now drew still nearer to him and laid one hand affectionately on his shoulder. Then I stretched forth the other hand and held it poised near the glass. "May I taste it?" I said.

"Certainly."

I raised the big brandy-and-soda glass to my lips.

"There's nothing the matter with it, uncle," I soon said. The intensity of my dose *had* tinctured the liquor. I had hoped that this effect would not occur. Still it was not very palpable, and I wondered that after his previous imbibations he should have observed it.

"Perhaps, then, I've merely imagined," said my uncle; and he took a large draught from the liquid. Soon, with no further mention of the strange flavour, he went on in his jovial, babbling way for several minutes. At last he took another big gulp and rose. Presently we passed upstairs together. His steps were a little unsteady, but not more so than I had several times remarked them at about this same hour of the night.

I left him at the door of his bedroom and moved to that of my own. The work now demanded of me must be performed with accuracy and speed. I greatly deplored the possibility of Graydon being burned. I wanted it to remain just as it was when I should become its master, and the thought of fire consuming or even partially ruining it was distressing to consider. But I had carefully calculated on this unhappy chance.

Graydon Hall, in the year 1813, had suffered from a disastrous though not exhaustive fire. Egerton Mountstuart, its then proprietor, had arranged, after the destruction of several valued pictures and nearly half a treasured library, that engines, hose, ladders, and all the facilities for extinguishing fire at a brief notice, should be placed in a certain structure not more than a quarter of a mile from the Hall itself. The preservation of this building and the retention there of certain men who should always be in readiness, night or day, had entered as an imperative clause into his will, and successive heirs to the property had religiously regarded it. Between the "fire-house," as it had got to be called, and the main edifice itself, both telegraphic and telephonic communication was now established. I had learned just where these electric agencies could be found (they were in a sort of alcove of the great second hall, scarcely twenty yards from my own bed-chamber), and I had also acquainted myself thoroughly with their modes of manipulation.

Entering my comfortable quarters after a smiling good-night to Uncle Malcolm, I first threw myself into an arm-chair, then took out my watch and steadily regarded it. I meant to give Mr. Mountstuart just twenty minutes, during

which time I felt certain that the narcotic would potently have worked. My pulse was equable, my brain clear. I had, it is true, an excited feeling, but only one of that pleasurable sort which some scientist might have when on the verge of verifying an experiment whose results wavered between disappointment and success. After a few more minutes I closed my watch, replaced it in my pocket, and clad my feet with a pair of soft slippers which were in readiness at arm's reach.

An hour before we left the smoking-room my uncle had dismissed his servants, as I was well aware. Never was there a man so utterly careless about the guarding of his wines and liquors, most of which were extremely rare and choice. I possessed myself of a large ewer and a box of wax tapers. Then, soundless-footed, I reopened my door. The house was now still as death. I slipped downstairs like a shadow, gained the smoking-room, and with the aid of my tapers found the unlocked sideboard. From a large vessel of alcoholic liquor I filled my ewer. This act was all very quickly performed. I had glided upstairs in no time and re-entered my room.

I now listened for a good five minutes. It was beyond credence that any one had heard me. The entire dwelling was too evidently wrapped in slumber. How brief a while would elapse before that slumber was destined to be broken by the cruellest of alarms! Possibly other lives than that of Uncle Malcolm would be sacrificed. I contemplated such a strong chance with unruffled repose. My one chief distress was being forced personally to warn the "fire-house." I should have preferred that some other hand than mine might press the electric button which would rouse its inmates. However, this was but a minor affair. I need simply assert, if any subsequent questions were asked, that I had sounded no summons. Who really had done so would then remain a mystery. Of course I might afterward have affirmed that I had smelled smoke and had hurried from my room to employ this known means of demanding aid. Still, the fact that I had been the last one of the great household in my uncle's company, just previous to his death,

might cause a certain undercurrent of discussion quite opposite to my aims and designs.

But chance, in a painful and frightful way, became my accessory and abettor. When I had assured myself that the narcotic had by this time produced its full effects, I once more left my apartment, with the filled ewer in my hands. Pausing at my uncle's door, I had a sudden dread that it might be locked. If so, I was baffled in a way no less trivial than tormenting. He had more than once told me that his valet was not expected to aid him in undressing, and that the man had orders not again to visit him, after he had attired himself for dinner, until the following morning.

Very softly I turned the knob. It yielded, and I stood for several seconds beside the aperture I had thus made.

"I might have been sure," swept through my thoughts, "that he would not lock his door. Did he ever lock anything from anybody? Is it not exactly like him to sleep unguarded?"

At the same time I reproached myself keenly for having failed to remember this potential hindrance. Here, at the outset of my career in crime, I was committing an error of extreme gravity. In reality, it had not turned out to be serious; but this result should act upon me as the most stringent of warnings.

I listened at the opening of the door, and soon heard a stertorous sound which it was easy to explain. Passing boldly into the chamber, I saw that what I had expected to happen had not disappointed me in the least. My uncle lay on the side of his bed, partially undressed, and in a deep sleep. The candelabrum, with its eight wax lights aflame, flared close to the bed. His book had fallen upon his breast. The window just opposite him was open, though its shade was drawn, and a somewhat brisk night-breeze made it palpitate and flutter.

I watched for a little while his flushed face. The anodyne surely had him well in its drowsy hold. Delay would be idle now. I drew one long breath, clenched my teeth, and acted.

With the contents of the liquor-filled ewer, I saturated

the bed, the pillow, and the clothes of the sleeper. Then I wet the fall of curtain that hung a few inches beyond his forehead. The alcohol in the stuff was volatile ; I must lose no time now.

Taking one of the candles from its socket, I ignited the soaked tapestry. As I did so I recall telling myself that it was a sorry shame to destroy so priceless a relic. With the same candle I fired my uncle's garments, his pillow and his bed-clothes. Then I threw the candle, still lighted, upon the rim of bed at his side, and darted from the room while a great glare pursued me.

I had become really excited now. My coolness had in marked measure left me. Still, I had presence of mind enough to close the door. But I was not at all prepared for so sudden a whirl of agitation, and when I had regained my own room I dropped weakly into a chair, overcome by tumultuous heart-beats. Oddly enough, this weakness wakened anger at myself, and the hostile effort with which I strove to defy it possibly saved me from a complete swoon.

When I recovered nerve again, I sprang up from the chair, pierced by throes of mortification and shame. Here, it shot through my brain, was a fine beginning of the glorious criminality which I had resolved upon, in its sevenfold reach and span of diabolism ! Truly, like Caliban, I was but a "delicate monster," after all.

But new calmness had come to me now, and I felt sure it had come to last. What had racked and unstrung me for a short while was the taking of the first step in my downward murderous course. Some hidden hereditary remnant in me of the humane and the merciful had thrilled my whole nature with an unforeseen shock. But all that was now past ; I had again become my actual self. After rising, I saw my face reflected in an opposite mirror ; it was white as that of a corpse.

In a surge of mortifying recollection I grew conscious that I had not yet given the alarm. My door was but partly closed ; I drew in a deep breath and stretched my limbs, as an athlete might do when he has failed in some feat which

he has determined to try again. The apparatus which I sought was placed midway between my uncle's apartments and my own, and I again swiftly glided out into the hall which led to it. Through my uncle's open door a volume of red-lit smoke was pouring. "No time should be lost," I remember thinking then, "if this magnificent house is to be saved."

My hand was put forward to unclasp the little metal box which jutted from the wall, when I perceived a figure which staggeringly approached me. It was that of my uncle, and it was a horror to behold. The flesh hung in ghastly shreds from one uplifted arm. His beard and hair were burned to the skin, and his brow and cheeks were blackened like a negro's. It seemed a miracle that he should live at all ; for he was nearly naked, and his raw and blistered body gleamed sickening between the charred tatters of his attire. I fancied, at first, that he was blind, and had wildly groped his way toward the fire-signal. But no ; although one eyelid looked as if it had been half burned off, he still retained his sight, for he recognised me and made at me a kind of gnashing sound, the teeth glistening denuded behind his heat-shrivelled lips.

On a sudden he astounded me with a voice, husky and gasping :

"You—*you* did this damnable thing! I—I saw you just as you left the room—woke up and saw you! Devil that you are, Harold, you—you've killed me! I'll tell them you're my murderer—I'll tell them, as sure——"

His forlorn tones failed him. The dread that he would really be able to speak and denounce me vanished in a few more seconds. For despite the marvellous energy with which he soon succeeded in reaching the alarm-box, tearing it open and ringing peal after peal on its wires, he had already grown quite speechless, and in a very brief while dropped down like lead at my feet, the most unearthly of human wrecks. I did not need to stoop over him in order to assure myself that he no longer breathed.

As for the open alarm-box, and the inert shape just below it, these would tell their own story. Once let me regain my

own room unperceived, and I could look all future accusation in the eyes—even if it should presume to confront me—with an air of the most dauntless innocence.

Quick as the flame that must now have been rioting in my uncle's room, I sped back to my own. There, with intense haste, I disrobed, and arrayed myself in pajamas, as if for rest. Turning out my light I slipped into bed, and fell at once to listening intently. Meanwhile I had locked my door, mindful of future charges and doubts.

I was risking my own life, of course. But I preferred doing so in place of having the conflagration traced to my hand. Execrable as I may appear to those who con these annals, cowardice was not among my faults. My crimes, it is true, have been the quintessence of both cowardice and villainy ; I do not dream of denying that. But I maintain that to commit them required a sublimity of personal risk, just as it required a sublimity of conscienceless evil. Since the beginning of my plan to reach great wealth through the assassination of seven fellow-creatures, I had more than once imagined that if Christianity were right and a demoniac individual force existed in the universe, then this Malignity which the Bible has named Devil, and Goethe has named Mephistopheles (*Der Geist der stets verneint*), had entered into my body, driving from it the spirit found there and replacing it with his own by an act of grim usurpature.

Crouched prostrate in my bed, I listened and waited. What if the alarm had not reached the fire-house ? What if those who should have heard and instantly acted upon it were deadly asleep or absent from their posts ?

Oddly enough, these thoughts did not disturb me. My nerves, as I lay there listening, were of steely firmness. I analysed my own sensations as if I had been a physician feeling the pulse of a patient. I made a discovery regarding myself, and tranquilly noted it : I had absolutely no terror of death ; I was a consistent infidel, if nothing else. Give me my dues, reader of these confessions. How many of our nineteenth century unbelievers can put themselves to the test as successfully as I did then, feeling that the fiend of fire might at any instant sweep onward to my destruction, and

yet obdurately determined that I would not leave my chamber until called thence by some outside evidence of monition or affright ?

The minutes were like hours, now. I heard a dull roaring sound which was easy to interpret. The desire of life became fiercely strong. I was about to leap from my bed and cast all further caution to the winds when a series of heavy knocks beset my door.

Even then I kept my self-poise perfectly.

"Who's there ?" I asked, in tones of affected drowsiness.

I heard the knob of my door violently turned several times.

"What is it ? What is it ?" I now exclaimed, half sure that I had recognised the voice.

"Mr. Mountstuart ! It's you, isn't it ? This *is* your room, then ! Oh, for God's sake, unlock your door ! The house is on fire !"

I dashed out of bed now, and unturned the key in the lock. As I opened my door I saw that the hall was one crimson glare. Escape might not be so easy at this point. And yet my dominating thought was—

"If I save myself I do so without one stain of suspicion !"

CHAPTER IV.

He who had wrought that summons at my door was none other than Mr. John Maurayne, the intimate friend and solicitor of my uncle, and the very man who had not long ago addressed him with such admonishing terms about his bad custom of reading in bed. He had occupied a chamber, as it chanced, in a wing of the huge house overlooking the quarters of our host, and the growing brightness of the blaze had wakened him.

I played my part with excellent skill. "Let us think first of the living," I said to Maurayne, after I had bent for an instant above my uncle's corpse, with a loud and shivering groan. "Let us try to rouse every one in the building, or even worse horrors may follow this one !"

"Right, indeed!" said Maurayne.

"Look," I pursued, catching his wrist and pointing to the open alarm-case. "My poor uncle has probably sent a message to the fire-house, even though burned in this dreadful way. How brave of him, how noble, how forgetful of self!"

In a few more minutes my "theory" was confirmed. The firemen rushed to their task, and before dawn the flames were wholly mastered, though not without stern struggles. A huge blackened cavity in one side of beautiful Graydon Hall remained to affirm the dolorous ravages it had undergone.

My uncle's funeral was an immense one. Uncle Cecil, of course, attended it, coming over from Cleeve Lodge in Essex with his three children. Between these two brothers, I mused, there could not possibly exist a greater contrast. Cecil Mountstuart was a tall, grey, spare man, who rarely said "yes" or "no" without clothing the monosyllables in a good deal of self-importance. He was incessantly smoking; from a boy I used to wonder how many cigars a day he consumed. His son, Angus, was still more sour and ungenial. Fatally deformed, with a large head and pale, keen features rising from a fragile little pair of humped shoulders, he seemed to express nearly the most conceivable blending of what was human and what was uncanny. His instruction had always been carried on by private tutors, and these, I had already learned, often shrank with distress from a mind that seemed to have literally come into the world pessimistic and cynical. As a child Angus had revealed the most curious tastes. He had a passion for reptiles, and at twelve years old had made a collection of frogs and snakes which were the horror of his sister Olive, though Edna regarded them with frosty tolerance. Later this weird taste took a scientific form, and now he was really a naturalist of some positive merit. His chief delight was in snakes and reptiles of every sort, though he cared little for them unless alive, and had induced his father to fit up for him at Cleeve Lodge an abode in which to accommodate his clammy pets. Here he would spend hours, and as his

sister Olive assured me, there were times when he ran the risk of being bitten, since he had now become the possessor of rattlesnakes, moccasins, and other venomous creatures.

Olive Mountstuart pleased me in a vague way as we talked together during her visit to the funeral. She promised, I thought, to be very handsome a little later, with her statuesque throat and her curiously golden hair, in which there were streaks that almost might be called chestnut, though this variant quality had no hint of discordance, the duskiness there mingling with the light as harmoniously as sunshine and shade mingle at the forest-fringed verge of a meadow.

It occurred to me, while I watched her broad-browed yet lily-slim face, lit by purplish black eyes, that I might perhaps have some reluctance in killing her when the time came ; for she indubitably was on my dark list, and must be the seventh to vanish. A twin, she was the junior of her sister Edna by at least half a day, and if Angus died without a will the inheritance would not reach her until her elder sister had perished. This elder sister, of whom I shall presently speak, was different from Olive as day from night ; and when I heard a piece of tidings with which their chill-mannered father soon acquainted me, I scarcely wondered at the substance of it.

Meanwhile, a strong trick of tendency in my own race had forcefully struck me. This was not the first time that I had given attention to the same subject, but I had never so earnestly heeded it as now. If good and evil have ever been separatively distinct in the members of a family they were thus displayed in our own. Heredity is usually a mixer of virtues and faults. There is a contest, and neither light nor gloom gains exactly the uppermost. But with us an opposite effect seemed to have been established. The dead Malcolm, at whose funeral we were all gathered, had been, when everything was said, a gentle and charitable spirit. His brother Cecil frowned his graceless opposite. Egerton, the new heir, was a nonentity ; his dulness, his dunce-like vacuity did not count, since he had neither marked amiability nor marked malice, nor marked cha-

racteristics of any appreciable kind ; and, therefore, like some mere stunted bush born of higher arboreal parentage, one should rate him as a failure, either in a noxious or wholesome sense, being simply the vapid and effete compromise between two extremes.

Then there was Blanche, his sister, who would succeed to the unentailed property after his death, provided he left no will. (And I would here state that my uncle Malcolm, with his usual carelessness, had left no will, the entire property going to his son, Egerton.)

Blanche, however, had received from her dead mother an inheritance of one thousand pounds a year. This was a somewhat handsome dowry, and yet I doubt if Blanche Mountstuart ever gave a thought to the fact that she possessed it. She was another instance of our queerly divided house. Slender, pale, modest, retiring, to look at her was to recognise the meekness and humility of her nature. In no respect was she physically attractive, but, if beauty was absent from her face, spirituality sweetly reigned there. The tenants of the estate adored her, and they had ample reason to place her upon a pedestal of sainthood. "Blanche would rather spend hours," her father had once said to me, "reading passages from the Bible to some sick or dying unfortunate, than mix in merriest gaieties with girls of her own age." She was devoutly religious, and yet, as far as I could discover, not bigoted or narrow in her fervid faith.

Whence, I questioned of myself, had she derived this faultless rectitude, this almost angelic goodness? And in response to the query I seemed to hear a voice that asked : "Whence have *you* derived your frigid fiendishness, and what is it that makes you the conscious and deliberate monster you are?"

Baffling mystery! In reflecting upon my cousin Angus, with his repulsive scorns and sarcasms, I was prone to conclude that the perverse element in our race had developed itself by means of two personalities, opposite and yet akin. Perhaps the physical difference alone existed, and Angus's bodily deformity was a sort of safety-valve for infamous

instincts to which my comely and agreeable presence gave freer sway. Or perhaps Angus would have found it in him to be just the villanous fellow I was if my greed for wealth had not in him remained dormant. Lastly, there was Edna and her sister Olive. Of the latter I have already spoken, and I need only add that to doubt the generous disposition betokened by her singularly charming face were like saying of some rose viewed at a distance that it was unendowed with perfume. Edna, on the other hand, was her brother Angus in feminine presentment, though without his deformity and without his brains. Dark-browed, bony and sinuous of shape, given to sulky and malicious moods, this girl was one more proof of those amazing contrasts to which I now refer. With extraordinary distinctiveness jealousy shone forth as her ruling vice. At the time with which we are now concerned she had become a torment to her twin-sister. Olive could scarcely move without being chided for some alleged misstep. She watched her nearest of kin with a sombre savagery. Olive now and then resented her incessant rebukes, and again would bow before them with gentlest complaisance. Pricked, stung, tormented, poor Olive bore this constant persecution with an almost ideal clemency.

During the days that both preceded and followed the funeral of my Uncle Malcolm, I spent much time in the large, book-filled library of the Hall. Here, one afternoon, I lighted upon a big folio volume whose pages, greatly to my enjoyment, confirmed the views that I had already taken. This chronicle had been written, as I soon saw, by no partisan admirer of the Mountstuarts. It began in decidedly eighteenth century English, which was sometimes both tedious and incorrect, with the statement that its aim had been to write fairly of every person at whose life it glanced, suppressing, on the one hand, no due censure, and venting, on the other, no unmerited praise. What I read astonished me strongly, while it also confirmed my former belief. There had been some devils among us Mountstuarts back in past centuries, and there had also been some saints. And betwixt these two extremes I could note hardly a single amalgam of evil and good, either the

first or last being assertively paramount in almost every biographic sketch that I scanned.

The funeral, as I have said, was a very large one, and afterward the near kindred remained for a day or two at the Hall. It struck me that Cecil Mountstuart was bitterly angry, in a furtive way, because his nephew, Egerton, had fallen heir to the entire property.

"The absence of a will surprises me, Harold," he said, in his glacial voice. "But then my poor brother was always heedless in practical matters. Not," he added, with a faint sniff of his pinched nostrils, "that I had any thought of a legacy, or any desire for one. Cleeve Lodge isn't a lordly home, but it is not devoid of comforts ; and, thank Heaven, I have the means of keeping it up very creditably ; my three children can bear themselves as equals of the best gentle folk in the country." And he gave a violent smoke-puff from the cigar that was hardly ever out of his lips.

"You have one very charming child," I said. "Few counties, Uncle Cecil, could furnish *her* equal in beauty and winsomeness."

"Olive?" he murmured, stroking his sharp chin with a slim hand. "Yes, she *is* pretty, and very sweet of spirit as well. It's too bad that her sister Edna gets along so ill with her."

"Edna is jealous of her."

He straightened himself haughtily for a second. Then, as if remembering that I was a Mountstuart and hence a privileged critic, he made curt though frank answer.

"Yes ; I suppose you've hit the secret of it. I'm thinking of letting Olive go to America."

"To America?" I repeated, in surprise.

"It will be best to part the girls, for a time, at least. My late wife's sister, you know, is married to a Canadian gentleman, and lives in Montreal. Mrs. Elphinstone is childless, and last year came to visit us in Essex. She fell in love with Olive, and she also observed Edna's unfortunate—er—lack of tenderness. Only last week I received a pleading letter from her, dated at her home in Montreal. She begs

me to send her Olive for a year, if no longer, and promises to lavish upon the child all affectionate care."

"You should consider the proposition favourably," I said. "It appeals to me as in every way sensible." But I had no sooner spoken these words than I regretted them. Olive, though the last on my list, was still fated, like those who preceded her there, to perish. And I had then no inclination to cross the ocean into Canada for the purpose of sealing her doom.

Still, my thoughts, just now, must concern themselves with other affairs. I had determined that Egerton's death should occur within the next three months, and that a longer interval should elapse before the removal of his sister. But I greatly desired that Egerton's destruction should seem to take place without the possibility of my knowledge of it. How to bring about so difficult a result? I went back to Dyandotte, three or four days after the funeral, and there pondered this question with much persistence and zeal. My perfect success—for so I considered it—in having swept into eternity the master of Graydon, must not be followed by another assassination at which my presence might permit close observers to say: "He was there, on the spot, two successive times." I plundered my intelligence, so to speak, in an effort whose futility whelmed me with chagrin. For my life I could think of no way in which to destroy Egerton without my presence being traceable at the spot where the crime was committed. Hours of meditation were consumed in trying to hit upon a plan. At last, when I had almost despaired of finding one, opportunity served me in the most surprising fashion.

I had gone up to London and had met there, at a popular and patrician club, several of my former college classmates. The weather was now horrible in London, as it nearly always is after November. But society, in countless ways, protested against the inclemencies of skies and winds, with its gay dinners and gatherings, held among select yet clever cliques. My chambers in Albemarle Street were pleasantly appointed; my name of Mountstuart clad me with enviable distinction; lovely women and brilliant men were glad to

welcome me. Hundreds of mortals would have thanked their benignant stars for being as well off in the world as myself. But all the luxurious homes that I saw wakened my hidden envy, and this sensation became often sickening to me when I noted the quiet splendour in which certain gentlemen were able to live. I was a Mountstuart, with two thousand pounds a year, and hence marriageable. But my matrimonial limitations were at times mortifyingly clear to me. Not that I wished ever to marry. But I wished to be held as a *parti*; I wished to have it said of me that I might marry whom I chose. I desired a home on Carlton House Terrace, or some such delectable spot; it would be delightful to have people speak of me as *the* Mountstuart, head of the family and possessor of half a million, besides the mastership of that noble Graydon Hall. I realised that the absence of a title would be no detriment, then; our race was so ancient that for its head not to have a handle to his name meant a sort of special honour in itself; every one who was anybody knew that we had long ago refused to be earls.

"Here I am," I would calmly say to myself, "a murderer, and yet moving among the highest and best. There is not a trace of depravity in my manner. People meet me for the first time, look into my eyes, and are won toward me nearly always, and if not always won, seldom repulsed. Could they see behind this mild and suave mask of mine, with what horror would they recoil from me!"

And yet I took infinite satisfaction in my own hypocrisy. It amused me vastly to watch the effects of my deception. The fact that I would be held a fiend if my true instincts were known, stimulated me in the liveliest and most enjoyable way. All this time, however, I was tormented by a sense of my inability to murder Egerton by some unprecedentedly skilful means. This haunted me like a remorse. But of remorse itself I knew nothing.

Often I would seek to analyse the cold depths of a disposition and temperament so different from all that with which I came into contact. Repeatedly, at these times, the one answer addressed me: I was the unhappy and unholy

result of modern scepticism. I believed in nothing, and comprehended that morality was only a utilitarian selection, a product of expediency, which had worked itself out into our present system of right and wrong after millions of centuries—from that shadowy period, indeed, when man had just ceased to be an ape until his slow progression had at last developed intellects of the finest and sturdiest fibre. This recognition, which to so many would have been a revelation of new and wholesome mental life, was for me a damning influence. Religion might have saved me, for I was one of those beings to whom hereditary potencies had made religion a necessary buoy and guide. Convinced that all such faith was foundationless and vain, I saw in life merely a farce, and chose to play my part there with an equal contempt for the performance itself and the fellow-actors among whom I strutted my little hour.

This problem of how shrewdly to kill my cousin Egerton was distressing me in marked degree, when, one day, destiny, as it seemed, proffered me at least the semblance of a solution.

At first the outlook was vague enough. Then I began to congratulate myself on a surprising windfall of luck. And a little later I became convinced that I could so manipulate circumstance as to assassinate Egerton without a living soul being able to prove that I was even in Derbyshire at the time of his death.

But this was not all. It gradually grew plain to me that I might succeed in making another man hang for the commission of my own crime.

CHAPTER V.

One morning, while I sat in my chambers, dispirited enough almost to decide that I would not join a certain house-party in Surrey, to which many a man I knew would have given a finger if he had been asked, my valet brought me a rough-scrawled card, bearing the name Andrew Cragge.

At first I remembered no such name, and then it flashed across me that the head gamekeeper at Graydon Hall must be waiting to see me. And I was right.

Old Andrew welcomed me with sad warmth. I soon learned his mission.

"Ah, this is most distressing!" I exclaimed, with every sign of sympathy.

A heavy scowl darkened Andrew's bronzed face. He was a man somewhat past fifty, with a sturdy figure, grizzled hair, and eyes of honest hazel.

"Mr. Egerton's above the girl, sir, of course," he said, "but she's ruined all the same. He's at Oxford now, as you perhaps know, sir."

"Yes," I murmured. "He went back after my poor dear uncle's most unhappy death. I do so hope that Miss Blanche knows nothing of this miserable matter?"

"Nothing, Mr. Mountstuart. She is with her governess, Mrs. Giddings, all the time, sir."

"And you've come up to London for the purpose of telling me what has happened, Andrew?" I pronounced these words with an accent of sincere compassion. "Upon my word," I went on, "it's very difficult indeed to tell you what should be done. You say that Madge's disgrace has become common talk?"

"Yes, sir."

Andrew Cragge heaved a deep sigh, and I saw the big, hard hands that hung at either of his sides clench themselves.

"There's only one thing to be done," he slowly continued. "Mr. Egerton must marry Madge."

"Marry her!" I exclaimed, with an irrepressible start.

The man's hazel eyes glistened, and his lips tightened round their clean-shorn edges. "My two children, sir, ain't of the ignorant sort. I've given 'em pretty fair schooling. Mark, my son, has a clerkship in a colliery-firm down at Newcastle, and he's every inch a man, sir—*he* wouldn't like to have a base-born nephew or niece any more than I'd like to have a base-born grandchild. God knows what Mark might do if he heard about this thing. I don't want to tell him yet. He loves Madge more than

most brothers love their sisters." Here Andrew Cragge's voice broke a little. "*I* ain't so fierce. I remember who the offender is. I couldn't shoot him down if he refused to marry Madge, for I loved his dead father, and me and my kith and kin has been at Graydon for almost a hundred years back. But Mark's different. He's got new notions. He voted the radical ticket, sir, down there, at the last election. He'd go square up to the master and say to him, 'Marry my sister before your child's born, or I'll shoot ye like a dog.' That's just Mark all over. I ain't threatening, Mr. Mountstuart; I'm only saying what I'm nearly sure is bound to happen."

By this time Andrew Cragge had begun to bore me. But I did not show him a gleam of my *ennui*. I dismissed him with a promise that I would shortly take a trip down into Oxford and have a talk with my cousin.

"Meanwhile," I said, "it seems to me that Mr. Egerton will most probably refuse to marry your daughter. Not that he should refuse to do so. If, as you tell me, she was a pure and good girl before he made her acquaintance, this marriage undoubtedly becomes his duty. But all men do not do their duty, my worthy Andrew, more's the pity!" I clasped the gamekeeper's rough hand very feelingly, as I spoke, and saw his kindly eyes moisten. I knew that he honoured and respected me all the more for my professed intentions of aid, and when he assured me, in a few grave, blunt words, that he had always looked upon me as head of the family since my honoured uncle breathed his last, I felt like throwing back my head and laughing out the whole magnificent irony of the situation.

Soon afterward I went to Oxford, and called upon my cousin in his handsome apartments at Balliol. Egerton twirled his meagre moustache and looked at me with amazement after he had listened for several minutes.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, and took from a box wrought of twisted silver one of the cigarettes I had lately declined. "The girl was a harum-scarum baggage, and everybody knew it. Marry her! What rot!" His face now grew sulkily sombre, and he gave his shoulders a kind

of reckless jerk. "I've enough to torment me as it is, I should say, Harold. They've just let me know it's not any use for me to stay here a bit longer."

"You mean you've been plucked, Egerton?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm going back to Graydon very soon. There's no use fighting the thing any further. If I was born a blooming idiot, why shouldn't I accept my fate?"

"Don't you think," I said, morally, "that idleness has more to do with your case than idiocy?"

"No," was the dry answer, "except that all idiots, I suppose, are more or less idle."

"And given to other vices?"

His sullen look deepened, and he made with his lips a disdainful sound. "Such as they are, Harold, I sha'n't atone for any of them by marrying Andrew Cragge's daughter; you may be sure of that." His face flushed and his lips curled. "Why, all the village knows what a wild vixen she is. Before I'd even seen her I heard that she'd sworn to wind me round her finger. But really, I can't say that she ever did so," he finished, while he suppressed a yawn, "and for the simple reason that I was never at all charmed enough to permit the winding."

I made up my mind that Egerton, whether right or wrong, was wholly obdurate. His return to Graydon struck me as altogether opportune. My plan had already more than dawned upon me. I wished to move like a shadow between Mark Cragge and the young aristocrat whom he believed to have betrayed his sister, and with hands of shadow, as it were, to draw them together. There was little chance, I argued, that Mark would ever seek to kill my cousin. But to have it fully known that he had threatened the young master's life would be an important point in my future proceedings.

From Oxford I went straight to Derbyshire, there without difficulty finding Andrew Cragge. I told the gamekeeper of my interview with Egerton, and of the latter's mocking statements. While I thus spoke, the suspicion that a listener was not far away began to steal upon me. And at

length none other than Mark Cragge himself burst into the room. He was a comely young man, of large and sinewy build, with eyes darker and more fiery than his father's, and mouth and nostrils of a sensitive cut. He had almost the air of a gentleman, and verified the statement his father had made about the "schooling" received by his sister and himself. For even in his great anger he showed a dignity that bespoke refinement, and an absence of all the uncouth bravado which might so easily accompany wrath in one of his plebeian place.

"I mean to meet Mr. Mountstuart," he said, "and make my demand. What I've just heard you tell my father that he affirmed about my sister, proves him as false of tongue as he is false of heart. Never, sir, was there a more deliberate piece of villainy. I don't give poor Madge much outward show of pity; I've scarcely even spoken to her since I got home. But because she's guilty that doesn't prevent your uncle's son from being ten times more so. And I'll hold him to a reckoning—so help me God, I will!"

"It's all very dreadful," I said, in grieved voice and with lowered head. Then I went up to Mark and laid my hand gently on his arm. It was an athletic arm, I noted, but not more so than my own. I was almost precisely of his stature, too, and had much the same breadth of chest and girth of limb.

"My good fellow," I added, "this 'reckoning' of which you speak can certainly not mean that you will attempt any personal assault. That would be madness in the extreme. Your father will, I am sure, bear me out in the offering of my purely sensible counsel."

Mark Cragge threw back his head, while flashes leaped from his eyes.

"The personal assault, sir," he returned, with a softness in his mien that curiously tinged the fierceness there, and that convinced me more than words could have done of his kindly feelings toward myself—"will depend altogether upon Egerton Mountstuart's treatment of me."

"But if he refuses pointblank," I urged, "to marry your sister——"

"Then," said Mark Cragge, with terrible repose, "he shall die for so refusing. I'll meet him with a pistol in my pocket."

"Mark! Mark!" cried his father, strongly agitated. "It'll be the gallows if you do such a deed! Think of that!" The elder man here broke into half-strangled sobs, addressing myself. "It's some of the gossips here, Mr. Harold, that sent for my son at Newcastle! *I* never wanted him here; I knew only too well what murderous fancies would get their grip on him if he should learn the master had refused to right this wrong. But oh, in the name of mercy, keep what he says to yourself!" Andrew Cragge continued, imploring me both with his gestures and his gaze.

"I don't believe it of him, Andrew," I said. "His fury will die down before another day. There's a strong leaven of good sense in him; one need but give his true, bright face a glance in order to see this." I purposely spoke so low that Mark could not hear me, and soon afterward took my departure, assured that the son was in a homicidal white-heat, and that the father felt thrills of acutest alarm.

It was now, as I clearly saw, requisite for me to act, if I acted at all, with immense caution and skill. Neither Egerton nor Mark Cragge must see me again, and yet I must know of their first (and possibly last) meeting.

Without going near Graydon, I learned in the village that Mr. Mountstuart had not yet arrived home. This information pleased me; I could now gain just the start that I desired. Returning to London an hour or so after my talk with the Cragges, I managed to make my presence at the village station and at the little hotel in the main street a fact to which certainly ten residents could testify hereafter. Distinctly I was going away again, and as I went it occurred to me that I might accentuate my departure by a few genial words and hand-shakes. Boyish days at Graydon had made many of the townsfolk know me, and the recent catastrophe at the Hall had caused me to become extremely popular here in L——, since the story of my great grief at Uncle Malcolm's

death had been coupled with that of my noble heroism in wakening the household, and at the same time helping to save his body from consuming flames. "They will at least be certain to remember that I came and went," passed through my thoughts as I boarded the train for London.

Once in Albemarle Street, I found an opportunity of quarrelling with my servant and promptly discharged him. He had several times of late showed signs of inebriety; I accused him of being in liquor when we next met; there were orders given a few days ago which I found unfulfilled; and this was enough. By the evening of the day on which I returned I had discharged Henry, with wages paid up to the full date of his rather angry demand.

So, then, I found myself free of all spying chances. It was a bitter and rainy night out-of-doors, but the hour was still early. I had already procured all the means required for the disguise which I had determined upon assuming. As previously told, I was a chemist of much knowledge, and what I now proposed to do had not in it the faintest experimental hint. The bath which I soon made for myself would, I felt certain, render me of a dark, almost black, Indian-like colour for the next six days. By that time the dye would gradually begin to disappear, and no agent whereof I was aware (which really means no agent at all) could bring me back to my normal complexion until three more days had elapsed.

The bath dyed every portion of my body. This was what I considered the safest plan, and I unflinchingly carried it out. If any attempt were made to investigate my "colour," the trial would for this reason result in total failure. After the bath, while making my toilet, I had strong misgivings as to my face. The intensity of the acid which I had employed (rendered harmless by other counteractive ingredients) had not yet begun its full assertive work. But a little later my anxiety wholly ceased. I regarded myself in my mirror with entire satisfaction. I was not by any means a negro, but I had acquired so deeply dusky a tint that this, taken together with my naturally black locks, black moustache

and clear-cut features, made me look as if I had but lately landed in England on one of the Calcutta steamers.

As for my real face, this alteration of hue made it completely unrecognisable. I was confident I could go where I pleased without a chance of being suspected. My own mother, if she had been alive, would not have dreamed that I was her son.

The attire in which I clad myself was excessively plain and dark. I intended to leave London that night for a town about six miles from Graydon Hall, in which I was totally unknown, and which belonged on the borderlands of another county. I packed the smallest of portmanteaus, determined to do with as few conveniences in the way of luggage as decent cleanliness would permit.

Everything was presently ready. I had my plan for passing the watchman downstairs. The building was a large one, and contained many lodgers. I had wrapped myself in a great coat, with an enormous collar. The halls were always kept dimly lit. When I reached the last one, in which the custodian of the house was nearly always to be found, I would hurry past him with my abnormal coat-collar turned up and my face buried in it. If he challenged me I would laughingly tell him who I was, and declare that a wretched sore throat had lately attacked me. If he offered to call a cab I would say that I was hurrying to enter one which a friend had ready for me near by in Dover Street. As for my small portmanteau, I had strapped it about my person in such a way that it hung down between the rear portion of my limbs and was quite concealed by the long folds of my coat. Locomotion was thus shorn of ease, but the bag, after all, was not large enough visibly to impede it, especially during the few moments in which my passage should be remarked through the gloom of the lower hall.

I had turned down my gas, and was about to quit my apartments, when suddenly footsteps broke the stillness of the outside hallway. They soon paused at my door. In another minute sounded the voice of Egerton.

"Cousin Harold, are you in? They told me downstairs that you were, so I just ran right up."

"Of all infernal things!" I thought. Standing perfectly still, not daring to move, scarcely daring to breathe, I waited for the knob to be turned. This presently was done. "Harold! Harold!" at the same time called my cousin's voice. Again, after a slight interval, he repeated my name. Then I heard him give an exasperated sigh, and soon afterward his retiring steps made me sure that he had departed.

And now I became aware that he had thrust a paper below the door. After waiting till the outside hall was again completely silent, I possessed myself of this paper. It was a rather short note, addressed to myself. It informed me that the Oxonian career of Mr. Egerton Mountstuart had come to a premature end; that he would take an evening train to Graydon Hall; that he meant scornfully to snap his fingers in the face of Andrew Cragge and all the other Cragges, and that he had hoped to see me and have a chat with me before he ran down into Derbyshire.

This note pleased me vastly. I now knew the exact date of Egerton's return, and hence could calculate with more or less precision upon the time at which he would meet Mark. Still, my knowledge on this point was most aggravatingly vague. I had clothed myself in the darkness of that Shadow which might steal between Andrew Cragge's son and his foe, but how such intervention might be brought about was still a very dubious question.

Leaving the house without suspicion seemed now beset by a new obstacle. After waiting a good fifteen minutes, I resolved boldly to quit the lower hall and merely give the watchman there some curt, evasive answer, provided he should seek to know who I was.

But, as it happily chanced, he allowed me to pass him where he sat drowsily in a little coign of gloom. I can only explain this course by the fact of his having taken me for some visitor who had arrived at one of the lodgers' rooms previous to his term of sentinelship. As for his explanation of Egerton's not having found me in my chambers (since the man himself had seen me enter the building a little more than an hour ago) I can only class this among the numerous

faults of lazy inattention which so few servants are without. Before midnight I had taken a room at the chief inn of the small town which I have already named. Whether I was held to be a negro or an Indian mattered little to myself, the hospitality which greeted me failing in no detail of courtesy. I slept a peaceful sleep that night, as I always did, and woke rather early to find that the rain which had followed me out of London was replaced by fitful yet assertive sunshine.

On the guests' book I had written down my name as "Mr. Khaled, London;" and though I was prepared for some sort of prying inquisitiveness in the way of verbal attacks either from the landlord, the fellow-lodgers, or the waiters who served me, in this regard I was most pleasantly disappointed. It happened that a very famous neighbouring ducal estate was on exhibition that day, and when the man who attended me at breakfast respectfully asked me if I designed going thither I replied that I did. But Laddiswoode Park, noble and pictorial though I knew it to be, failed to lure me this morning. I set forth in its direction, but soon changed my course.

As I walked toward L—— and finally reached it, the intense difficulty of my task assailed me. True, I had no fears for the perfect efficacy of my disguise. But in a quiet village like this, a swarthy-faced stranger could not hope to escape notice and comment. On the other hand, I was confident of two things: first, that the old careless generosity and hospitality of my late uncle still held sway on his estate, and that from morning to night all who had any semblance of being reputable tourists could roam at will the beautiful wooded domain. Second, that the wrath of Mark Cragge would quickly manifest itself as regarded an attempt to seek an interview with Egerton. I was so well acquainted with every nook and corner of the big, tree-thronged park, that to hide there all night, if I chose, would not have been by any means hard; and I even recalled a certain part of the wall which I could scale, at a pinch, if desirous of getting away before sunrise. The stones at this particular spot had become partially dislodged, and the

meadow just beyond their semi-ruin lay but a brief distance from the turnpike. I had purchased in London some biscuits and a flagon of brandy. These were in the small portmanteau which I now wore strapped against my person. The big coat I had left at the inn, intending to reclaim it if I returned there, and in any case feeling heedless concerning it as a future means of identification, since it was a garment that I had never worn more than once or twice—an "ulster" of the cheapest and most ordinary kind, which I had purchased more than three years ago during a trip among the north-country lakes.

Boldness or nothing must now be my policy. The nearer that I could bring myself to Mark Cragge the surer were my chances of winning at the strangely hazardous game which I had set out to play. I passed the lodge-keeper at Graydon without receiving from him the faintest uncivil hint. He evidently took me for an Indian gentleman who was "doing" the country with solitary zeal. Soon I found myself moving among the familiar forestry of Graydon. The fresh blue of the sky was blended with a kind of wintry pearl. Against it the nude tree-boughs interlaced and intertangled their dark curves. The sward underfoot was tarnished in tawny patches, with intervals of an almost vernal green. A sleepy yet nipping wind rustled the dead leaves in hollows of tree trunks where they had long ago sought refuge, poor fugitives, from rigors of far sterner airs. My love of nature in all her protean phases made me pause, now, and watch this encompassment with a tingling relish. I have never at all understood why beauty in the outer world so keenly affected me. The pleasure had surely nothing "divine" about it. Ruskin could not have explained it from his religious theories of art, since behind all the charms and grandeurs of earthly creation I was sensible of no latent deity whatever. I simply enjoyed, with a sensuous delight which I suppose might have been called pagan. I loved a sunset as I loved a sonata by Beethoven. My own existence has always seemed to me an incarnate refutation of the creed that ethics and æsthetics are in any way connected with one

another. Granting that I was (and still am) one of the vilest of living creatures, I maintain that my appreciation of the beautiful could not have been stronger if I had ranked among the most spotless of my species. Only, that point about my torpor to all the appeals of poetry—here I have always been troubled by a sense of bafflement, of mystery, of spiritual defeat.

The home of Andrew Cragge was easy for me to find. I strolled toward its doorstep like one in an admiring daze at the picturesque façade and the graceful groups of enskirting evergreens. Just as I had come within twenty yards or so of the pretty ivy-clad porch, I perceived Andrew himself, wearing his hat and carrying a stout stick, open the front door, close it sharply behind him, and descend upon the lawn with lowered head and troubled face. He, in turn, was not aware of my presence until he stood quite close to me. I quailed a little under the effect of his sudden scrutiny. This was the first real trial of my disguise. What if he should see through it in a trice?

But the next instant I secretly mocked my own fears. Had I not tested the dusky mask that so delicately yet safely ensheathed my features?

Andrew was always courteous; I knew that of old concerning him, and the truth was proved now, when, in spite of his evident mental distress, he greeted me with an affable bow.

"A pleasant morning, sir."

"Very," I replied. "You are one of the guardians, I suppose, of this very fine estate."

"I'm the head gamekeeper, sir."

"Ah? yes?" I returned, musingly. "That has a familiar sound. In India, on the larger country-places, we have gamekeepers also."

I felt that the honest eyes were scanning my dark visage.

"You're from India, then, sir?"

"Yes. I've been in England only about a fortnight. You've a very pleasant little home here. I've no doubt you're most happy in it; you certainly ought to be."

I knew Andrew's frank, expansive nature, and shrewdly

calculated upon it just now, when perhaps emotional worriment might render him even unwontedly confiding.

I was right. "It ain't as happy a home, sir, as it looks," returned Andrew, after an uneasy pause. "There was trouble enough in it, I thought, when my poor wife died, but there's worse trouble now. Still, sir, all this would be no concern o' yours—none at all."

I was about to reply cordially, when a strange thing occurred. Coming toward us from the direction of the hall, I saw Mark. A frown gloomed his face, and he held in one hand what seemed to be a half-crumpled letter.

"My boy—my son—my poor boy!" broke from Andrew.

"Is he in very great distress?" I asked.

"Yes, sir—yes, sir. It's a sorry case."

I stood quite still as Mark came swingingly across the lawns to his father. He glanced at me, and in his excitement doubtless thought me a negro, and a most unimportant person besides. The grounds of Graydon were often visited by the oddest kinds of people, and it is more than probable that he was well used to the garrulously social spirit of his father.

That one sweeping look was all that he gave me. "The cursed young villain!" I heard him snarl, as he reached Andrew's side.

"Hush, Mark—hush, my boy. What's happened at the Hall? Tell me."

"I was refused entrance. I said I'd wait outside till the master wrote me, stating why he wouldn't see me. I did wait, and at last this scrawl was thrust out by one of the flunkeys. It's not long, but it's very much to the point. It tells me not to go there any more." Here Mark gave an acrid laugh. "It says my 'infernal nonsense' has been found out, and my 'threatening language' had 'better stop at once.' It's all the hellish bullying of a young beast, father! It's——"

"Stop, Mark!—stop!"

No doubt Andrew now made a gesture of monition toward myself. All the words thus far spoken had been just audible and no more, and while perfectly hearing them

I had coolly turned my back upon the speakers and become absorbed, to all appearance, in the prickly leaves of a holly-tree, as though I had never yet seen any shrub so curious, feeling with my fingers the thick, glossy leaves, and touching daintily the tips of their tiny thorns.

"Who's that?" I heard Mark say in gruff semitone.

"An Indian gentleman—a tourist; he's strolling about the place."

"Indian, eh? "Oh, yes. He looks it; I thought he was a nigger."

"No. You can see he isn't, if——"

"Yes, I do see. Well, father, this thing hasn't been settled yet. I'll wait round the Hall till I meet that rogue face to face. I'll wait from now till morning. I'll wait all day to-morrow."

("So will *you*," said my familiar devil to me, while I went on touching the holly-thorns and putting my head critically sidewise, as though I could not for my life classify this odd vegetable species—"*so will you!*")

"You mustn't talk that way, Mark," I heard the old man's voice pleading.

"I've got to, father. Don't you bother about me."

"Mark! Mark!"

"I'll kill him if he doesn't right Madge. I'll give him his chance first, when we meet face to face, and if he tells me that he'll turn up his nose at the whole affair, I'll shoot him like the dog he is! I'll keep watch up at the Hall, and——"

"Hush, Mark! Hush, I say! You'll do nothing so wicked. You'll——"

And here the voices died away. Evidently the speakers were receding from me. I slowly turned, and saw that Andrew Cragge and his son were walking arm-in-arm toward the cottage together.

At this point I loiteringly moved onward, convinced that to remain longer would be idle, and that by some fortuitous boon I had gained untold innings.

With my darkened skin, with my audacity, with my willingness to wait and watch, to plot and plan, I had

expected a task of untold hardship, ended by possible defeat. But accident had aided me to a degree almost ridiculously unforeseen. As I pursued my walk through those leafless yet attractive trees, I asked myself if what we term accident had not lain at the root of nearly all the grand human successes. Alexander, Cæsar, Napoleon—where would these three great conquerors have been if so-named chance had not often turned their abettor? I was a reader of modern novels, but I disliked those of the Wilkie Collins order, those in which every event seems mechanically prearranged, and things happen as if they were fragments of the multiplication-table, dovetailing one into another. The stories that pleased me best were those that showed the most clearly just how our destinies are moulded by the apparent caprices of chance. I had learned precisely what I wished to learn regarding Mark Cragge's present attitude toward his father's young master. It now looked as if Mark would act as precisely the destroying agent I would have rejoiced to make him. Still, my presence here, though fraught with peril, was needful. The blow which waited to be struck might not strike home after all.

I knew that Egerton was no coward. He would leave the Hall whenever and however he chose, despite menace. Throughout all that day, I afterwards discovered, a wretched headache and nausea annoyed him, due, perhaps, as I have always thought, to some farewell Oxford banquet with a few of the dissipated co-disciples whose vices had pushed him into expulsion.

I spent the entire day wandering about the estate. I knew certain lonely parts of it, whence, through the leafless tree-boughs, I could command a fairly good view of the main entrance. Three or four times I saw Mark Cragge pass that entrance, with lowered head and hands clasped behind him. Murder was evidently in his thoughts; at least I judged so then, though later I had cause to reverse this verdict.

My own position began to grow hatefully uncomfortable. The refreshment which I had brought with me was unsatis-

fying, and the boredom of doing nothing except watch the front porch of Graydon, while endeavouring to escape all observation myself, became distressing past words. The untrustworthy weather always to be found in England soon lost its brightness, too, and by the afternoon a cloudy heaven replaced the sunny one which had made coldness endurable. A stern chill crept into the air, and to glance at the sky was to see what appeared imminent threats of rain. If rain should fall I would have no protection against it. Rain did not fall, however, and the raw, melancholy evening darkened round me. I began to feel that some sentinel of the premises might at any moment light upon me and drive me out at the gates. A sense that my vigil was likely to prove wholly vain depressed me more and more. No doubt Mark Cragge still continued his watch, but at length the wintry dusk had so deepened that I could no longer discern his presence unless I drew much nearer to the building itself. This approach I made, and while doing so I recalled that there was a grove of fir-trees, very dense and shadowy, at a distance of about two hundred yards from the chief portals of Graydon. This hiding-place I sought, but I had no sooner entered its gloomful and spicy-smelling interior than I began to dread its co-occupation by Mark Cragge himself. For what was more natural than that this fierce enemy of Egerton should select the same retreat? But after a while the silence reassured me. Still, it was terribly damp here, and in spite of my superb physical health I became fearful of falling a prey to some malady if I lingered much longer among these monastic trees. I knew of a certain rustic seat, and groped my way toward it. Ensconced here, I had a good view of the main doorway, and also of considerable road and lawn. Night had now almost completely fallen; it would be of pitchy darkness. Already I felt that I could scarcely see the form of Mark Cragge if it should again cross the space I was watching. And while this thought grew upon me, a dim figure became visible, which I just recognised, and no more, as that of Mark.

Almost at the same moment I saw the front door open

and the master of Graydon come forth on the porch. He had a tired, depressed air, and he wore no hat. His hands were thrust into his pockets and his legs were stretched apart, just as might so easily be the attitude of a man (and especially of a young man) who is bored to death by a long and wearisome day inside his house. He peered to right and left, and the light from the hall behind him so gave his face into relief that I could clearly note, from its veering profile, an expression of mingled haughtiness and fatigue. Scarcely had I made this observation, when a figure, with its back toward me, slipped in front of him, pausing at the steps of the porch.

Seeing was not easy in my present circumstances, but hearing was a different affair. Of the shrill, firm voice that now sounded I lost no word.

"You've refused to meet me, sir," the voice said. "I've come here, and I've waited here for a good while. I don't know if you're hiding from me or not. But I demand to see you and speak with you."

Egerton's answer came slowly and with a ring of contempt.

"You're the son of Cragge, my gamekeeper?"

"Yes."

"I thought I recognised you. Well, what the devil are you after?"

"I've told you. I want to talk with you."

"Yes? About what?"

"About my sister."

There was no excitement in that brief retort of Mark's. But it seemed to disarray Egerton. He turned and grasped the knob of the great half-open door as though he were in the act of re-entering the house. But suddenly he put his hand to his head, as if remembering that it was uncovered. Grasping the knob of the door (as I could now, with strained eyes, very dimly perceive) he shot these curt sentences over his shoulder:

"Your messages to me have been d——d impudent. I won't receive you here in the Hall. But I'll meet you outside there in a minute, and show you that I've no fear of your threats or yourself."

"Yes, sir," shot back Mark, with cool resonance. "You'll go in and get two or three lackeys to back you."

"Will I?" returned Egerton, doggedly. My inference that he was no coward had not been erroneous. "Will I?" he repeated; and like a flash he shut the big door and went down the steps, hatless as he was. Facing Mark in the shadow, he now said, with the defiance of a brave man who dares dangerous odds: "What's this thing you want to talk to me about? Your sister?"

"Yes, my sister. And you know why!" (Here was my time. I rose and took from a rear pocket of my coat the pistol which I had brought with me. In a second I had reached the edge of the shadowy fir-grove.)

"I know very little about your sister," sped the voice of Egerton.

"That is not true," rang the answer.

"Not true, eh? Well, then, call it that, if you please. You came here, I suppose, to insult me—or drag money out of me—which?"

"I came here to insist upon your marrying the girl you've ruined. That's all."

A silence followed. The two dark shapes were close beside one another. I slipped to the very utmost verge of the grove. The cold needles of the boughs brushed and pricked my face as I stooped and peered, like a beast of prey.

"I no more ruined her," scoffed Egerton, "than the Sultan of Turkey did! What rubbish have you got into your brain? Find out how the village thought of this sister you're defending so valiantly, long before I even saw her."

"She was a pure girl till you met her. That I'll swear to."

"Then you'll swear to a lie."

"Look here, Mr. Mountstuart," leaped the husky and hurried response, "if it's your plan to sneer this whole affair down you'll do so to your cost. We Cragges have been for a century at Graydon, father and son. Times are no longer what they were. You've done a damnable act, and you must answer for it either one way or another. One

way is to marry Madge—I don't care how little you're pleased to do it, or how much it goes against your grain as a so-called aristocrat, sir! The other way is to face me."

"You! And what will *you* do?"

"I'll kill you if you let Madge's child be born a bastard!"

Another silence. "You'll kill me, eh?" broke sneeringly from Egerton, and with a calmness of delivery for which I could not but admire him, feeling almost certain as I did feel that he stood there quite unarmed. "Such blackguards as you can't browbeat *me*. If you kill me you'll hang for it——"

"Then I'll hang!"

"Let go my coat!"

"Not till you swear you'll marry the girl you've brought shame on!"

Egerton struck out, then; I vaguely saw him do so. Afterward they grappled, and in a few seconds they fell.

Here was my time. I darted out of the covert in which I had been crouching. The light was still strong enough to let me see Egerton's face, where it gleamed pale and rageful. Already I had drawn out my pistol; quick as thought I set the muzzle within a few inches of his forehead, and fired. He dropped lifeless in Mark's arms. Mark, horrified, released him and turned on me. Then came my crucial moment. I knew that Egerton was dead. The point was now to get possession of Mark's pistol (which I had heard him say that he carried) and to escape with it, leaving my own on the ground. Like a flash I was at his throat, and I must here state that in the ensuing contest my sudden appearance and the extraordinary surprise it had evoked were of immense aid to me. I imagine a sort of faintness overcame Mark, or that perhaps the clutch of my fingers at his throat wrought with him some unnerving strangulation. With unforeseen speed my left hand had found his pistol in a skirt-pocket of his coat. Leaping up from him, after having secured this treasure, I fled many yards away, and then (doubtless most imprudently) paused.

I was well in shadow of the porch now. I saw the main

door open, and two figures outlined in the shaft of light that broke down across the steps from threshold to lawn. They were servants, of course, whom the pistol-shot had alarmed. And by this same illumination I discerned Mark, struggling dazedly to his feet, like a man who has seen a ghost and felt on his cheek its unearthly breath.

This was enough. Certain that the new-arriving servants had not seen me, I darted away. The gloom was now very deep. But I knew whither I hurried. This fine domain of Graydon, which I had determined one day to possess, was familiar enough for that, even in the thickening darkness wherethrough I strove to escape from it.

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning, thoroughly exhausted, I took a northward bound train at a station seven or eight miles away from the scene of my second crime. In the railway carriage, which luckily I shared with no one else, my slumber was so heavy that the guards had to awake me once or twice for my tickets, and finally at Liverpool to awake me once again. Thence I took another train for Edinburgh, where I soon had evidences that my stained skin was commencing to resume its natural colour. On this account I changed my hotel several times while I was in the Scotch capital, and so gradually became my natural self again without attracting the least suspicion.

By this time I had read various newspaper accounts of the brutal murder of my cousin Egerton, by the son of his gamekeeper. There was but one opinion on the subject of this bloody act: Mark Cragge, the deliberate and daring assassin, should undoubtedly swing for it. He had been brazen enough to assert his innocence—to declare that some one else did the deed, afterward rushing away from him in the darkness. Of course this dragging-in of a mysterious third party was the most lame and audacious lie. Fifty people had heard Mark Cragge swear that he would kill Mr. Mountstuart; he had been seen watching the house

hours previously ; a pistol, too plainly his own, was found at Mr. Mountstuart's side, with one barrel discharged. Never, indeed, affirmed an influential journal, was there a more flagrant case of malice and fury wreaking itself upon an English gentleman of high position and cleanly record. The girl, this journal pursued, had borne an evil reputation in the neighbourhood for several years. This fact had transpired at the inquest, and would undoubtedly tell in a terrible way at the trial.

I returned to London, and quietly said to inquiring friends that I had been "down in Scotland for a few days." No one, as far as I could see, gave this explanation of my absence a second thought. A man of my youth and financial freedom naturally came and went as he pleased. I could not put on mourning for my cousin, since I already wore it for his father. My expression of indignation at the murder drew forth much sympathy. I soon went to Graydon Hall, and on meeting young Blanche explained to her that I would surely have attended the funeral of her brother if an unfortunate carelessness had not prevented me from doing more than scan the newspapers while I was in the North.

A short time before his death Egerton had made a will, bequeathing everything to his sister Blanche, whom he had always tenderly loved. This young girl was now the mistress of Graydon Hall and the possessor of half a million pounds sterling, though to look on her one could scarcely realise the dignifying fact. If indeed she realised it, the effect which it wrought upon her was only one of greater meekness and sweetness than had yet marked her manner. Egerton's death had shocked her horribly. "I feel, dear Harold," she said to me, with her pale-gray eyes swimming in tears, "as if I should bear this last awful bereavement till the hour of my death."

"Poor, darling Blanche," I said, taking her delicate hand and warmly pressing it, "your troubles have indeed been bitter ! No one feels for you more acutely than I do—no one, I believe, feels for you half so much ! My compassion is boundless, dear girl ! I would move heaven and earth if I could only lessen your sufferings ! "

"How sweet of you—how like your large true heart!" Blanche murmured; and her head sank for a moment on my breast. "Father always said of you that you had the kindest and most generous of natures!"

This scene with Blanche bored me a little, but that was all. It did not in the faintest degree move me with contrition, or cause me to wince from any insurgent sense of my own peerless hypocrisy. Still, it appealed to my imagination, of which, as I insist upon reiterating to the reader, I possessed an ample share. It contained elements both of the dramatic and picturesque, and hence would have been fraught for me with really pungent interest if only this virtuous young kinswoman of mine had not been so tiresomely passionless.

"What," I now found myself musing, "if I should marry her and thus become the actual though not the legal lord of Graydon and all its golden appurtenances? What if I should in this fashion end abruptly the lurid career which it will take five more assassinations to complete? Blanche would recoil, at first; for marriage to her prim and timid little soul would be like a tornado to a garden-lily. But in a short time I could change all that. She would yield if only I chose to woo with spirit enough."

And yet the idea of making her my wife soon became odious. If I married at all I should surely not marry a little atom of monotony like that. No matter what plenteous wealth she brought me, I should loathe her to such a degree soon after our union that the very idea of being bound to her would deal me most exquisite disgust. I might, it is true, marry her, induce her to make me unconditionally her heir, and then kill her. I contemplated this course with much reflective energy one evening during my stay at Graydon Hall, in solitude, after a pleasant dinner, and while soothed by the fumes of a specially fragrant cigar. No, I concluded, such a plan would be ridiculously stupid. However adroit my methods, their results would entail suspicion if not disaster. It would be tempting investigation, if not discovery, to possess myself of this noble property by causing a third death in the same household so soon after those

other two. Poor, pious little Blanche must assuredly die, but not in a way that would leave me a widower.

My visit at Graydon was longer than I had intended it to be. There were matters connected with the management of the large property about which Blanche sought my counsel; and with all modesty I may declare that I was most capably qualified to bestow it. For one of less undaunted nerve than myself, the bed-chamber in which I passed my nights would perhaps have been peopled with distressing phantoms. But I slept a sweet and refreshing sleep every night that I spent in the home of my ancestors. I had marvellously perfect health; I despised the idea of ghostly visitants; and more than this, I had begun to take a grim, delicious relish in the slow accomplishment of my tremendously homicidal purpose.

When I expressed to Blanche my regret not to have seen our uncle Cecil and his three children at the funeral of Egerton, she surprised me by saying that Olive, the younger of the twins, had departed for Canada.

A strange thrill passed through me as I heard this news. It had almost the force of a thunderclap. "Olive gone!" I exclaimed; and then, flushing a little as Blanche's surprised eyes met my own. "It's—it's because of Edna's queer jealousy," I almost stammered. "Is not that the true reason?"

"I fear so—I fear so," faltered Blanche, drooping her gaze. "Edna made her sister's life almost intolerable. And then it was so fortunate that her aunt, Mrs. Elphinstone, had become infatuated with Olive. There have been one or two letters from her since she arrived in Montreal. The Elphinstones are rich, social people. Olive, though still the merest girl, is made to live quite a merry life by her loving aunt. For her companion she has a young niece of Mr. Elphinstone's, who has already grown to adore her. She writes with rapture of Roberta Stirling. The Elphinstones have a large country-place on the Niagara River, quite near the world-famous Falls, which all we English people are so anxious to look upon. Early in June every year they go there, and just now, I believe,

Olive is thrilled with expectations of a delightful summer."

After hearing this piece of very unwelcome tidings I told myself that it was a devilish piece of ill-luck. But a little later I took a far more cheerful view of Olive's absence. It might not last more than a year, when all was said. Besides, was I not the worst churl of ingratitude to scowl at fate for having badly used me, when twice its aid had proved so timely and so precious ?

Before leaving Graydon Hall I saw much of Blanche, and arrived at the conclusion that she would consent to become my wife far more easily than I had first supposed. I wanted to show the neighbourhood with what depth of sympathy I regarded her bereaved position, and so I would often allow myself to be seen either driving or walking in her company. Sometimes the girl's sole companion and former governess, a certain Mrs. Giddings, would occupy a seat in our carriage. Mrs. Giddings usually went at my invitation ; I soon saw that Blanche, though clingingly fond of her friend, would have preferred that she remained at home. For myself, I thought Mrs. Giddings a mournful old prude and prig. She was yellow and wrinkled, and had a stoop. All unbeautiful women not only fatigued me, but roused my secret wrath. I sometimes thought how pleasant it would be to give this old creature a slow poison (with entire personal safety, of course) and smilingly watch her expire by inches. Naturally this will strike my reader as an impulse of the most abominable cruelty. But I beg to insist that it was nothing of the sort. It was precisely the same tendency which asserts itself in more ordinary mortals than I when they are brought into contact with a black beetle or a rat. And in so far as concerned my treatment of Mrs. Giddings, it was politeness at full, bland flower. I felt sure that she thought me alike the essence of all gallantry and high-mindedness. I only cared to have her drive with Blanche and myself because her presence prevented, on the part of my cousin, certain pretty speeches and meaning glances which it would now be rankly stupid for me to misinterpret. Beyond all doubt Blanche had

fallen in love with me, and one day Mrs. Giddings drew me aside, and with certain rollings of her glaucous old eyes and sentimental pursings of her shrivelled old lips, the lady told me in ludicrous paraphrase that this was the case.

"Oh, no, no," I insisted. "You are quite wrong, my dear Mrs. Giddings—quite positively wrong! I do hope you will not acquaint poor, dear Blanche with your idle fancies. It might wound her very deeply if you did." And I frowned and shook my finger in the face of this aged and unpleasant tattler, really bullying her into future silence.

At the same time I was confident that Blanche had grown to cherish me a good deal more than was wholesome for her peace of mind. It may have been an infatuation less sudden than I supposed. Possibly it had begun before my present sojourn at the Hall. Just when it had altered from spark to flame I could not guess; but now a hundred tender and fluttered signs made her passion obvious as daylight.

She had another companion quite as devoted as Mrs. Giddings, and to my taste, much more agreeable. This was her dog, Hector, which had nominally belonged, in past months, to her dead brother, but which had always made Blanche the object of his special fondness. Hector was a Newfoundland of the purest sort, a magnificent brute, black as night, with topaz eyes, like a cat's, only much larger and full of an honest constancy in place of feline mutability. He had long hair, soft as silk, a head of surpassing grace, and a tail that curled above his body in a sort of feathery grandeur. He always went with Blanche on her walks, and to all other dogs he was the soul of dignified tolerance. Once, Blanche told me, when attacked by a huge mastiff larger than himself, he had bitten his foe clean through the throat, severed a great vein and caused his death. But this act had been merely one of self-defence. At all usual times Hector was replete in kindness. "I don't think, however," Blanche said to me, one day, "that he is by any means equally polite to everybody. Between ourselves, he never particularly cared for poor Egerton, his real owner and master. But you, for instance"—and here Blanche gave me, with her pale-gray eyes, one of those

wistful and intense looks which I now often received from her—"it is truly remarkable how he seems to care for you. I believe that with a little effort you would be able quite to alienate his affections from myself."

"That is an accomplishment," I hastened to answer, "which I should very much dislike attaining."

"You're so kind-hearted," she said, almost below her breath. "I think it would cause you real pain to give any fellow-creature the faintest annoyance"

"You judge me far too leniently," I laughed, while I patted Hector's beauteous, majestic head. Frequently, nowadays, I would find myself sneering at the reputed "sagacity" of dogs. I recalled novels and tales that I had read, in which the villain of the plot is suddenly assailed, or at least greeted with ominous growls, by some domestic dog seldom if ever known to be unamiable. What rubbish, I mused, are nearly all these popular creeds and ideas! If Hector, this superb animal, could detect human villainy by any of the alleged "instinct" so often attributed to his species, then surely he should days ago have planted his white fangs in my throat. But no; I deceived him with the same success that I had deceived his intellectual superiors.

"Is there a gleam," I had become fond, at this time, of cynically asking myself—"is there a gleam of the so-called 'spiritual' underlying the material phenomena of life? Is it not just as absurd to endow man with ideal and holy qualities as to affirm that some wondrous clairvoyance may lodge itself in the brain of a dog? This vaunting of love, for example, as the supreme and ennobling grace of human nature. Did not such silly deification of mere bodily longing originate from vainglory and self-worship? Mean and fleeting atoms that we were, why should we seek to crown ourselves with the mythic nimbus of angels? In all my arch-infamy, was I not far wiser than my fellows? Unutterable monster that I would so quickly be named if my covert deeds, thoughts and desires could once be bared to light, had I not reached, after all, the higher plane of wisdom in concluding that 'soul' was a mere conceit of the mind,

that we are simply multitudes of vitalised and individualised dirt, and that the coarse greed of the beast underlies every sentiment which we applaud as noble or semi-divine ? "

This series of self-questionings, which may strike many as so hideously, so revoltingly heathen, was destined to receive its due answer. I did not even vaguely dream the possibility of such answer then, entrenched as I was behind my own frozen certitudes. But already, though I failed to surmise it, the trumpet of my doom was being prepared for one keen and thrilling peal. Destiny, as it were, had stretched forth an irreversible hand, and soon she would lift that trumpet to her implacable lips !

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE the county promised to make quick work with Mark Cragge. His father was in agonies of fear at the prospect of the approaching trial. He sought me more than once with his plaints and asseverations, and finally besought that I would drive over to the jail and see his son.

" I'm certain, sir," he said, " that my boy's innocent of this murder. I'm certain you'll believe so, too, if you'll only listen to his story."

A sense of the absurdity in my listening to this young man's " story " caused me almost to laugh aloud. But I consented to meet Mark in his grim cell. There was something sublime to me in my own hypocrisy ; I was fascinated by it, as though it had been some vast shadowy cave amid whose recesses I was peering, with one or two dim-descried forms outlined spectrally in its gloom. Of a truth, I could not help musing, there was never a man so diverted by his own depths of turpitude as was I !

Mark had lost all his old wrathful demeanour. He seemed cowed, appalled, by the mystery which had made him its prey. He told me with trembling voice of the strange figure that had darted forth from dusk on that fateful evening.

"You surely don't believe that personage to have been a ghost?" I said, with a smile half of compassion and half of irony.

"No, no," Mark sighed. "He was flesh and blood. He was quite as real, Mr. Mountstuart, as you are."

"Indeed, indeed, my poor Mark?" I said, with a secretly deliberated aimlessness of tone. "But your story, Heaven help you, does not hang together. There, at the very feet of my dead cousin, was left the pistol——"

"Which was not mine, Mr. Mountstuart! Mine was of different make altogether. Mine was——"

"Then you carried a pistol?"

Mark nodded, drooping his head. "Yes, sir, I carried one."

"And you've seen the one which this ghostly individual carried?"

"At the inquest—yes, sir."

"And you admit that you prowled about the front entrance of Graydon with intent to kill?"

"With intent to meet the master——"

"And what?" I quickly questioned, though very peaceably. "Did you expect to settle your grudge without bloodshed?"

"If I could—yes."

"If you *could?*" I reiterated. "Do you mean that you would not have used your own pistol (which you assert that this airy being filched from you after my cousin was shot through the brain) provided you could have induced Mr. Mountstuart to marry a wanton?"

Mark's face contracted, and both his hands clenched themselves. "I never knew——" he gasped.

"You never knew, my poor Mark, nor did your estimable father know. But all the village was well aware of your sister's real life."

Here I turned to Andrew, the forlorn father of the culprit. "What more can be said?" I queried, with a break in my voice that struck me as being very finely artistic. "Everything is against your unhappy son—*everything!* The pistol that was found was one of ordinary make. His own pistol,

he alleges, was robbed from him by—— Oh!" I broke off, with a wonderful little laugh, "how can human credulity permit itself to be taxed so greatly!"

Mark, overhearing me, gave a groan that was blended with a shudder. "I never killed Egerton Mountstuart!" he cried. "I *might* have done it, I admit, but I did not. There is so much in that!"

I answered, at first, with a pitying smile. "Alas!" I then said, seeming to struggle with the words, as though their sternness hurt a nature as rich in humanity as my own, "there is not enough in your assertion, my unhappy man, to save you from the scaffold."

"The scaffold!" exclaimed old Andrew; and he threw his hands upward for an instant, then burying his face in them with wild dejection.

"Oh, my God," muttered Mark, "must it come to that? And I'm innocent—innocent!"

I looked at the stalwart yet tremulous young fellow with eyes that seemed to him, as I doubt not, two compassionate stars.

"You will have every chance to prove your innocence," I said, a little brokenly—just brokenly and emotionally enough for the occasion, as it struck my own critical taste—"and if you fail—if you fail, I fear that your doom is certain!"

While I turned away from Mark, as though overcome by the bitterness of my own prophecy, Andrew's hand timidly plucked my sleeve.

"Mr. Harold," came the faltering appeal, "can *nothing* be done about that dark stranger—an Indian gentleman he called himself—who came to my home on the very morning of the murder? Is there not a chance, sir?"

I gave an impatient shrug, here, while keeping my face pitifully sombre.

"Oh, Andrew," I said, "is that poor, dark-complexioned tourist, who perhaps did not stay more than an hour or so on the lawns of Graydon, to be charged with a murder of whose very commission he is perhaps at this moment completely ignorant? Ah, no, no, Andrew! I would not, I really *would* not, drag that guiltless person into the trial!

You did so, I hear, at the inquest, and with slight avail. Take my counsel, and let the fact of his having passed for a few moments across your own and your son's field of vision, remain undiscussed hereafter. Even to touch upon the subject at all, now, may injure a cause already too fatally feeble!"

I was about to depart from the cell, and suddenly, while nearing its door, I turned toward Mark. "God help you!" I said, with an excellent and telling fervour.

I would graciously have permitted the prisoner to take my hand in this *rôle* of high-minded Samaritan which I was assuming. But Mark made no attempt even to touch my hand. He simply bowed his head and answered:

"It does not seem, sir, as if God *would* help me!"

I glanced at Andrew while I quitted the cell. "What blasphemy!" I whispered.

In thin and quivering tones, while he followed me, Andrew replied:

"Oh, Mr. Harold, it *sounds* like blasphemy, but it *only* sounds! Have you no comforting words for my boy, sir? Is it all so drearily dark with him?"

"Dark as night," I answered, in the same semitone. "Dark," I added, "as death itself!"

Soon after this I returned to London, feeling that my departure caused Blanche far more pain than she permitted herself to show. Now, in still deeper mourning than before, I partook of no social pleasures, living almost the life of a recluse. My friends admired me for the respect which I paid to the memory of my cousin. "We Mountstuarts were always a bit clannish," I would say, when people hinted that my retirement was needlessly severe. "Besides, poor Egerton's death was so pathetic, and his murderer, you know, still remains unpunished."

The trial, however, soon came off. None but circumstantial evidence could be brought against Mark, but this was of a kind terribly strong. The defence endeavoured to make a point out of the presence of an unknown Indian gentleman on the grounds of Graydon during the day which preceded the evening of the murder, but this plea was

almost hissed when presented. It then strove to prove that the pistol found near Egerton by the startled servants whom my shot had summoned out of doors had never been the property of the prisoner. Here one or two witnesses from Newcastle, who testified that Mark had long possessed another pistol of quite different make, pierced the gloom of his case with a few rays of hope. But nothing else could be affirmed in his favour. His rash and open threats told against him with damning force, and the fact that Egerton's own servants had found him in a dazed, dishevelled state at only a slight distance from the prone form of their master, wrought hideously in his disfavour. Then, too, the examination of Madge (who broke down hysterically in court) made the alleged misdeed of the dead seem far less culpable than his worst detractors had held it. And at last, when the judge gave his charge to the jury, every one had but a single belief as to which way the coming verdict would turn.

Conviction speedily followed, and Mark was sentenced to be hanged. I was in London at this time, and the news, when I heard it, gave me a joyful thrill. It was pleasant to be quite outspoken, too, regarding my delight, and to say, with a relieved sigh : "At last they have brought to justice the murderer of poor Egerton!" But inwardly my satisfaction was of different sort. In the death of Mark for a crime committed by myself I saw the last potentiality of being inculpated vanish for ever. The stone, so to speak, was rolled upon the sepulchre, and no future hand would ever stir it.

Within the following month Mark was hanged at the county jail. I smiled as I read in the newspaper that he "died bravely, *but protesting his innocence to the last.*" No wonder, poor fellow! How extraordinary if he had finally admitted his guilt! I could almost imagine some zealous clergyman hypnotising him into doing so.

About a week after the execution I went down to Graydon Hall. Blanche's pale eyes danced as they lighted upon me. But soon her face saddened while she said : "Is it not too melancholy? Old Andrew, the father of Mark Cragge, died suddenly of paralysis this morning."

"Dead, really, poor old chap? I'll go to his funeral."

And I did go. The funeral was large; Andrew had always been popular, and the awful sorrow of his declining years (a sorrow which no one doubted to have caused his death) had roused the widest sympathy. Many honest and kindly eyes rested upon myself. I felt sure that my presence at the funeral was held to be a high honour. "What a pity that *he* ain't the heir," I overheard a shabby-clad girl say to her companion, just as we were all moving from the little ancient, dreamy-lit church. "He looks so much better than Miss Blanche does."

"Oh, but she's so very good."

"I'm sure he's good too. You can see it in his face."

"They ought to marry one another, Bess, oughtn't they?"

"Oh, he'll marry some beautiful lady—a duke's daughter, perhaps."

"I once saw a duke's daughter, and she wasn't beautiful a bit."

"Oh, I know, dear; they sometimes happen that way, but not often."

Blanche had been indisposed with one of her occasional blinding headaches, that day, or she would have gone with me to the large though simple funeral. When I returned to the Hall, however, I found her sitting up and looking quite herself again.

"What conjuror has been here?" I asked.

"You," she replied, smiling.

"I? But I went away."

"Ah, yes, but you were coming back in a little while."

"And the thought of my coming restored you?"

"It helped." She laughed faintly, here. "Graydon is dull, you know."

"I'm glad to brighten it the least in the world."

"You do more than that!" she said, and with so much fervour that I regretted my words. Her pale-gray eyes kept haunting my face as though incapable of leaving it. Their feverish radiance annoyed me. "You'll stay with us now for several days, will you not?" she went on; and the note of pleading in her voice was acutely personal.

"Oh, not so long," I said lightly. "It's impossible."

"Impossible!" she sighed. "Ah, don't tell me that it is —pray, don't!"

"I must. The truth is, I've resolved to go into the East —to India, and perhaps Japan!"

She pressed her lips tightly together—and drooped her head. "All that distance away!" she presently murmured.

"There are no distances, nowadays," I returned, still in the same careless vein. "We've annihilated them by our modern wonders of locomotion."

She shook her head in eager negative. "Not for me—not for me! I shall still think of you only in one way—as thousands of miles apart from me!"

This was direct, and therefore none the more palatable. I sought to turn the current of our talk in a new direction. "You're not so bored here as you think," I ventured to say. "You've your charities, your visits to the poor, your many kindly engagements and concerns."

"Oh, quite right. I do what I can toward helping others. *You* must understand the comfort which *that* can bring!"

"I? Oh, good heavens! You don't take me for a person with any such noble aims?"

"With the very noblest!" she cried, softly. "I'm sure that you would help a fellow-creature far quicker than you would help yourself."

"My dear Blanche," I said, with a deliberated and cutting coldness, "your knowledge of me is based far too much on imagination. I'm a very selfish and ordinary fellow, and I dislike to be misjudged, even when the estimate is flattering."

She plainly felt the repelling force I employed. Her voice was changed, even chilled, as she replied, with a mournful stubbornness: "I believe in you, though—I believe in you! You can't convince me that you haven't the warmest and sweetest of hearts! I first realised this when my poor father perished in so dreadful a way, and afterward, when Egerton was cut off with such unholy suddenness, I became still more confident of it. You——"

"Oh, spare me," I broke in, still coldly, but with an inflection more gracious. "I'd so much rather talk of yourself and your doings."

"They're terribly monotonous."

"Everything seems leaden-grey to you now, and no wonder. You've been through so much grief."

"True. It must have shortened my life ; I feel sure that it has, Harold."

"Don't think of such a thing ! You're still young, and with the finest purposes before you."

"I want to help my race all I can ! That thought is always haunting me now ! Oh," she pursued, with clasped hands and trembling lips, "I should love to do some really grand thing ! I would be willing to spend nearly all my fortune—this fortune that has come to me with such strange unexpectedness ! I have no use for more than a few hundred pounds a year ; that sum would easily keep us (poor, faithful old Mrs. Giddings and myself, I mean) as long as we lived. I spoke to papa's old friend, Mr. Maurayne, the other day, on this same subject, when he came here to stay with us for a day or two. My proposition amazed him, at first, but soon, I think, he silently applauded it."

"Did he, indeed ?" I said to myself. "The devil take him for not having snubbed it outright ! "

"You see," continued Blanche, "the money is quite my own, to do with it as I please. And though Uncle Cecil might frown very darkly, his children would not be left by any means penniless if I should dedicate almost the whole amount to some splendid institution of aid for that vast multitude, the poor of England."

For a while I was really speechless. That my tremendous and hitherto triumphant plan should be defeated at its third stage by the crude sentimentality of a dreaming girl nearly deprived me of breath. But soon I found words, and gently advised my cousin not to be precipitate, but allow her heroic longings the slow leisure of meditation, which they both demanded and deserved. "Meanwhile," I added, smiling, "You must live healthfully, see as much of your favourite neighbours as your mourning will permit,

and not forget an occasional romp or two with your cherished Hector among the lanes and meadows."

"Hector?" she repeated, with a start. "That reminds me; I must go to him. I visit him once every two hours or so, and it is now my time again. But I forget; you have not heard of his illness?"

"His illness? No," I said. And then I permitted myself to laugh aloud. "You speak of him as if he were Mr. Gladstone, or the member from Birmingham."

"Ah, don't make fun of poor Hector," she pleaded, with the most serious looks and tones. "He is in the stables, on a heap of straw that I have changed for him every day. They wanted to chain him, but I would not permit that; it would be quite too cruel. He was taken about four days ago. He appears to have giddy fits, and refuses almost all food. But I'm very hopeful about him; I really think he is getting better. One of the grooms tells me that he is sure it is nothing but a kind of distemper. Will you go with me now to the stables and take a look at him?"

"Willingly," I assented, "if you will first let me go to my room and put on a lighter coat; for the weather has grown much warmer during the past few hours."

While I was absent from Blanche my mind rapidly and indignantly worked. I had meant to seek the East and remain there a good while. It would be time enough to kill Blanche when I returned; nothing could be wiser than to make this third attempt only after an appreciable interval had elapsed. But now I felt drawn into quite an opposite course. This idea of my cousin's to make ducks and drakes of her money for a "grand" charity pierced me with positive fright. I resolved that so ridiculous a deadlock should never occur. As for going to India and leaving her here to tamper with the fortune which in a certain manner I had got to regard as my own, that plan I could never dream of pursuing.

"No," I mused, "it's hatefully awkward, but Blanche has got to depart from sublunar things much more promptly than I had supposed. I don't choose to marry her and stop her saintly depredations *that* way. Ah, what a miserable

bore! Here I must give up that delightful Oriental trip and rack my brains, instead, how I can commit another assassination that will stay safely within the bounds of discovery. For death must certainly seize Blanche's meddling fingers and give them a very decisive slap, such as the nurse gives to the mischievous child. A fine state of affairs, forsooth! I'd rather do something prompt and desperate now, within a short time, and even run the risk of being suspected, than take no action whatever."

Just then a soft voice called to me from the outer hall. "Are you not ready, Harold?"

"Very soon I shall be, came my cheerful answer. "Are you in so great a hurry?"

"It's past my time to visit Hector. Yes, I *am* in a hurry."

"*So am I!*"

But I did not speak those words to Blanche. I spoke them to my own image in the dressing-glass before me, and with an expression that suddenly clothed my face in so venomous a change that for an instant I shrank back, scarcely recognising it.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLANCHE and I soon afterward repaired to the stables, and there, in one corner of a very clean apartment, lying on a very clean pile of straw, we gazed at the sick dog. He gave a few feeble whines as he saw Blanche, and one or two feeble wags of his bushy tail. But he made no attempt to rise. Blanche stooped down beside him, and as she did so he licked her hand once or twice.

"Don't let him do that, miss," urged the groom who stood near.

"Why not?" said Blanche, a little petulantly.

"It ain't right, miss—really, it ain't," declared the groom.

"Pshaw, Hughes," returned Blanche, tossing her head with sad vehemence. "I'm not afraid the dear old fellow is going mad, if you *are!*" And she patted Hector's head,

leaning her face so close to his that her lips almost touched the shaggy temples.

Here I thought it would seem best to break in. "My dear Blanche," I said, "you *should* be more cautious."

"Oh, nonsense, Harold. How dreadful for dogs that the moment they're ill people should think they're going mad!"

"'Twasn't that *I* thought so, sir," said Hughes (a stalwart young man, with a clean-shorn, virile face), addressing me in place of his young mistress. "But Mr. Danzing, the village chemist, see him this mornin', sir, and didn't like the looks of him at all."

Just then Hector made a movement that caused Blanche to recoil, though in another second she resumed her patting of his head.

"That's how he keeps behavin' all the time, lately," explained Hughes. "It's just as if he was snappin' at flies, but there ain't any flies here to speak of, and there wasn't none then, when he bobbed up and clicked his jaws like that."

I nodded. The dog struck me as extremely ill, though I had no means of determining the nature of his malady. His glazed eyes, his swollen and purplish tongue, and the occasional shivers that passed through his brawny frame, all made me recall, however, accounts of canine rabies which I had both read and heard.

Blanche persisted in her caresses, and once or twice, while she stooped above the prostrate beast, I saw her furtively wipe her eyes with her handkerchief. Indeed, those eyes were full of tears as she presently lifted them to mine.

"Isn't it too distressing, Harold? I do love him so, and he's been for months the dearest of companions and friends to me."

"It's unfortunate, surely," I answered, as she again bowed her head above Hector. "But Hughes, here, is right," I went on. "You should not take foolish risks."

At this point the groom slipped to my side. "Oh, sir," he whispered, "she *is* takin' foolish risks. D'ye know, sir, I'm keepin' a pistol here all the time—a thing I hate to

carry as much as—well, as if 'twas a case o' smallpox," finished poor Hughes, plainly at a loss for a simile, while he tapped his vigorous breast with one rough hand. "For if the dog *should* get ugly, sir, and frisk round all on a suddent, what pertection would there be but a bullet or two?"

"You're right, Hughes," I whispered back. "But don't shoot unless he gives real signs of madness."

The words had hardly left my lips when Blanche sprang to her feet with a keen, nervous cry. She stretched forth one frail arm, and I saw that it was profusely bleeding.

Her cry, the next moment, was echoed by Hughes. For some reason he did not whip forth his pistol, as might have been expected, but seized, instead, a heavy iron crowbar which chance had left leaning against the near wall. As he did so, Blanche gave another cry, catching his sinewy wrist with the hand whose arm was unwounded.

"No, no, Hughes! I will not have it! Put that thing down! put it down, I say!" Then, as the man reluctantly obeyed her, "Hector did not bite me," she went on—"oh, no; not at all. He merely made one of those queer movements of his, like snapping at a fly. Now, don't look serious, Harold," she went on. "I'm not a bit frightened. And remember, Hughes" (regarding the groom with something that meant her best attempt at a scowl), "if you should presume to hurt that dog in any way I—I should never forgive you!"

Hughes bit his lip and gazed anxiously down at his charge. I, meanwhile, had torn my cambric handkerchief into two or three strips, and begun to bind it round the hurt arm of Blanche. She gave a tremolo of laughter. "It feels like a rather deep wound, now," she said. "One of his big teeth, you know, caught in my flesh. He couldn't help it.

"I don't suppose he could help it," was my reply. Then, grimly jocose, I added, "But perhaps the doctor can."

"The doctor? Oh, nonsense, Harold! It's not bad enough for that! I'll have Martha bathe it in cold water as soon as I return home—or perhaps dear old Mrs. Giddings will insist on doing so herself."

"Wounds like these need to be cauterised, my dear Blanche." I looked at Hughes. "Have Dr. Strangford sent for at once," I ordered; "let your man go on horseback."

"Harold," she said, as we went together toward the house, "I really believe that you are alarmed about me." Her glistening eyes devoured my face, and the prevalent sallowness of her own was tinged with tender rose.

"Indeed, not at all," I answered. "But injuries like these from any sick animal are apt to prove troublesome unless properly treated."

Beyond doubt Blanche had truly spoken in saying that she felt no fear. At the same time, her delicate nervous system soon succumbed again, and when Dr. Strangford arrived at the Hall her headache had returned with great violence.

The physician, on learning the nature of her wound, at once agreed with me that it should be cauterised. But it struck me that he performed this work very ill. Like many country practitioners, he knew little of surgery in even its simplest phases, and being a young, timid-faced person, with evident feebleness of fibre, I doubted if he could get through his work without turning nauseated at the raw, irregular gash. By the time that he was through his task it had grown somewhat late in the afternoon. At my suggestion he administered a sedative to Blanche, and when it had taken effect I left her lying in a peaceful slumber, and repaired to the stables.

Hughes met me as I neared the heap of straw where Hector still lay stretched. Without speaking I drew nearer to the big, handsome bulk, while Hughes followed me. "Good heavens!" I cried, starting back. "He's dead!"

"Yes, sir," said Hughes, embarrassedly, but still somehow quite firmly, joining me. "About a half-hour after you and Miss Blanche had gone, sir, he got very bad. He rose to his feet, sir; his eyes were like red coals, and his tongue was hangin' from his mouth as though 'twas rotted at the roots. And then, sir, like a flash o' lightnin, he gave a dash at me. I dodged him behind the big barrel yonder, and got

out my pistol. All the while he was glarin' that dreadful, sir, it made the calves o' my legs feel cold. But pretty soon he forgot me, and went tearin' round this room like the crazy thing he was. How I managed to get both doors shut I'm blessed if I really know, sir ; but I did get 'em shut, and kept free of his awful teeth all the time. I was thinkin' of Miss Blanche's orders not to kill him, and I—I was thinkin' of my own shins, and I was thinkin', too, sir, of the terrible danger if he once got loose. Perhaps I ought to have fired sooner, Mr. Mountstuart—perhaps not at all.

"But when both doors was closed, and I was caged all alone with the wild rascal, I says 'here goes,' and I let him have it once, missin' him, and once again, hittin' him square in the side of the 'ead. That shot was a settler, and he dropped like a stone. Then I laid him just where he was when you and Miss Blanche was here, and—well, sir, after the way he bit the young missus, I ain't been at all easy in my mind about havin' this new piece o' business get abroad so she'd hear of it. Two young chaps off yonder in the stables came rushin' in when the shots reached them, but I made them both swear they'd keep dark ; and everybody here at the Hall, sir, is so fond of poor Miss Blanche, and pities her so in her trouble other ways, that we'd all do our best not to frighten her now. I hope you think I didn't do wrong, sir. He was a splendid dog, sir, but——"

"Oh, if he behaved as you say," I broke in kindly, "shooting was the only way to deal with him."

"It's occurred to me," said Hughes, evincing great relief at my approval, "that we might cook up some story to deceive Miss Blanche—leastways until her arm's healed and her nerves are quieted."

"True." I now knelt down and examined the dead dog with curious care. In his one exposed temple was visible the mark of Hughes's bullet. His jaws, partly open, were exuding a whitish foam, and one half-closed eye showed a segment of crimson pupil.

"Plainly," I thought, "this dog was mad when death took him." Rising, I said aloud to Hughes, with a great show of authority and an accent of much command : "Do

not let this animal be stirred from where he lies until I give orders to have him buried."

"Buried, sir?"

"Yes, that is the best way. We must have a medical investigation, if it's possible." I glanced about the apartment. "These two doors can be locked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lock the further one, then, and give me both keys. And Hughes——"

"Yes, sir."

Here I rose, and cast toward the groom a look of worriment which I was sure that he understood. "This affair, my man, is a horribly grave one. Of course Miss Blanche couldn't help being greatly alarmed by it, as I myself am. It will be best to tell her that we have had the dog taken away, to be treated by a veterinary surgeon living several miles from here."

"Very well, sir."

I slipped a coin into Hughes's hand. "Try hard, now," I said, "to keep it all a secret from your young mistress."

"I'll try my hardest, sir," he answered; and I knew that he admired me for my solicitude as much as he thanked me for my clemency. In reality I cared very little whether Blanche learned the truth or not. If I had not been quite confident that the shock of learning it would fail to kill her, I would indeed have told her with my own lips.

Just when a certain idea entered my brain—an idea which will no doubt be thought unspeakably infamous—I cannot for certainty say. After leaving the stables with the keys of both doors in my pockets, I remember admiring the loveliness of the sunset, which had made the west all one charming checkerwork of little pomegranate-hued clouds, with a heavy lower bordering of gold wherein the sun had sunk. The fancy came to me, as I gazed, of seeing a great swarm of rosy birds fly toward a golden shore. The roofs of Graydon loomed large and dark below this sky of magic tints. Some of the towering elms had in their outlines the symmetry of laboriously carven ebony, while the evergreens,

oval and pointed, made the evening air all the more luminous and liquid because of their sharp glooms, and the evening breeze all the more fresh and buoyant because of their formal stillness.

"Why am I not fonder of poetry than I am," here passed through my thoughts, "when I bow so devotedly to beauty?" And even at this very moment, if I mistake not, the seed of a pestilent purpose was ripening quietly in my soul, and preparing itself to bring forth noxious leaves, to bear baleful fruit.

Blanche was still sleeping when I re-entered the house, and I dressed for dinner, wondering if she would join me at the hour it was served. She did so, or rather strove to do so, but before the end of soup Mrs. Giddings and I both persuaded her to retire. Unwillingly she complied, and food, which I am sure she never touched, was sent her afterward. Mrs. Giddings accompanied her from the dining-room, and returned with a troubled air much sooner than I had expected.

"She says, Mr. Mountstuart," declared the old lady, "that it will annoy her horribly to have you dine alone."

"She is quite right," I replied, with a gallantry which I tried not to make sound sardonic.

"It's only one of her very bad headaches," Mrs. Giddings assured me, with her spectacled eyes intent on a fragment of fish. "But there's that bruise on her arm—do you know how she came by it?"

In some very ordinary way, I suppose."

"She won't tell me; she simply says, when I ask her, 'Oh, it's a mere trifle.' But I'm sure it pains her, for I've watched her movements with her hands when she did not know I was looking. And then Dr. Strangford came here while I was paying a visit on Mrs. Trelawney. Why was he sent for?" the old lady went on, arraigning me with her spectacled eyes. "The servants who told me that he came, appear quite ignorant of why he came. Was it on account of her head? But she's subject to these attacks; they're simply nervous affections; she knows how to deal with them, and so do I. It does strike me as so odd

that she should have had him here only because of her head."

I made light enough answers to this tiresome monologue. Mrs. Giddings bored me so, both then and during the remainder of the dinner, that I found it difficult to pay her the duly polite responses.

Later I repaired to my own chambers, and while smoking a particularly strong cigar—one of Egerton's, by the way, which he had brought with him on that disastrous home-coming from Oxford—I strove to look squarely in the face of this new project which had now begun to weave, spider-like, about my singular spirit, the strange filaments of its thrall.

As a means of killing Blanche I frankly assured myself that I did not like it. The whole process was too experimental, and hence too uncertain. But as a pure scheme, provided it were successful, I pronounced it superb. The girl's immediate death would not at all please me : why not endeavour to bring about that death in a way which would be gloriously safe if it should hit the mark and no less so if it proved a mere pointless effort ?

Queerly enough, the horror of the thing which I soon made up my mind to do occasioned me only a sort of triumphant amusement. Who had ever dreamed of such an original mode whereby to murder a fellow-creature ? It shone unique, a peerless black diamond of crime.

At length I became fully resolved to act without further delay. Passing from the house, after certain preparations in my own room, I resought the stables. Unlocking that portion of them where Hector was lying, I found myself in almost pitchy darkness. But I had brought matches with me, and a candle ; soon I had all the light I needed. What I wished to do required but little time, and previous experience in the manipulation of dangerous chemicals now aided me as regarded neatness and despatch. Soon blowing out my light I returned to the house.

Going again to my room, I found in one of my portmanteaus a harmless whitish salve in a slim, little round box—something which I had used of late for chapped hands. With a portion of this I mixed—well, why not say it ?—

a good deal of the saliva of the animal which I believed to have died mad so brief a while ago. If the virus of rabies had really lurked between Hector's lips, then this concoction should prove poisonous past words.

It was quite dark when I went to Mrs. Giddings and asked that lady if Blanche had yet wakened from her sleep. Yes, Mrs. Giddings told me, and added that she had been about to send for me, as Blanche had asked that I should come and chat with her.

"Remember not to be too agreeable," whispered the old lady, with a dip of her scrawny frame in my direction, followed by a quick recessive movement.

"Pray, what *do* you mean?" I asked, coldly.

"Oh, you know, you know! It would be cruel. But you will not believe me. You won't realise that the dear girl—— But never mind. It's a peculiar native modesty with you—a kind of stubborn modesty, my dear Mr. Mountstuart, though none the less attractive, I *must* admit. Or perhaps it all means that your heart has previously been captured by——"

"Dear Mrs. Giddings," I curtly broke in, "my heart has always belonged to my charming cousin Blanche."

"Oh, *truly?* You *can't* mean, then——"

"I mean that I'm her very affectionate and loyal kinsman."

"Is that *all?*" simpered my interlocutress, raising a shrunken finger and shaking it at me. "Oh, you're very deep, Mr. Mountstuart—you're dreadfully deep! I suppose that is why you're so interesting. If one knew the real history of your soul one would feel as if he had been a pearl-diver who had brought from the sea precious booty."

"There are no pearls among my profundities," I laughed. "And if there were," I should have liked to add, but did not, "I would never try the diversion of casting them before swine." Aloud, however, I still continued: "If Blanche, as you say, is now awake, I will go to her."

To my cousin's chambers it was only a step. I found Blanche seated in an easy chair, looking decidedly better than when I had seen her last.

"Your headache is gone, then?" I asked.

"Entirely. Oh, I shall be quite well now for a number of days. These attacks are like storms that clear the air. They always leave my health improved."

"And your arm? Does that trouble you?"

She glanced down at the bandage just above her slender wrist. "A trifle—yes."

"Are you sure it does not trouble you more than a trifle?" I asked, sinking into a chair at her side.

"Oh, no. It pains a little now and then; that is all."

"Dr. Strangford's dressing of it," I said, after a slight pause, "struck me as rather inefficient."

"Did you think so?"

"Yes. I'm something of a physician myself. Chemists, you know, nearly always are, and I've dabbled a good deal in chemistry, as you've heard."

She gave me a very sweet and trustful glance, while I lifted her arm gently and laid it on the tufted ledge of her chair.

"It often seems to me," she said, "as if you had a great deal more knowledge on nearly every subject, Harold, than you care to admit."

"Not at all, Blanche. You misjudge me most flatteringly. This bandage seems to have been put on in an awkward fashion. May I undo it and use some fresh, clean linen that I have brought with me?"

"As you please," she answered. Then, a little later: "I know, of course, what this means. You've torn up one or two of those nice soft handkerchiefs of yours, and you're going to replace Dr. Strangford's bandage with those. How very sweet of you."

"Not half so sweet as you imagine," I smilingly dissented. "They were only two squares of cambric, Blanche, in which I had discovered several impracticable holes."

She answered my smile as I bent over the wound which I had now bared. I knew that her eyes were lingering hungrily on my lowered face. "This afternoon, at the stables, you were more reckless," came her reply.

"Oh, that was an emergency."

"You thought my wound serious then. Do you think it so now?"

"It's rather ugly—that's all. The cauterisation gives it a still uglier look, naturally." I held her wrist, now, so that I could feel her pulse quicken, and gazed up into her fragile face, flushed as if with pleasurable emotions. "I've some healing salve here, that couldn't hurt the least in the world, and might appreciably help. May I press some of it into the wound? It may soothe and it will not give you, in any case, the slightest pain."

"Do just as you please," she said. Her low voice trembled a little, as though half with gratitude and half with a feeling far more intense.

I did "just as I pleased." That night I slept with perfect serenity, except for a short period of wakefulness after turning out my light and placing my head on the pillow. What kept me awake, however, was less real perturbation than a sort of excited pride. I felt myself clad with an almost oppressive splendour of guilt. It was like a garment stiff with baleful-flashing gems, weighing me down as if with a wealth of dishonour that taxed the most devilish endurance. Perhaps for the first time I wholly realised the immense picturesqueness of sin. Nero's debaucheries of wickedness, the callous criminalities of the Borgias and their myrmidons, haunted me in angry scarlets and purples of fascinating retrospect. Iniquity stole forth its clammy head, like some monstrous turtle's from its shell, and looked at me with icy and lidless eyes. "We talk," I thought, "of the beauties and harmonies of virtuous living. It is only such human demons as I am—incarnate curses and scourges of the race—who know all the sombre glories and grandeurs of evil-doing. Step by step one enters deeper and deeper into a noble yet sinister cathedral—into the church of Satan himself. See; in those niches are not the shapes of saints, but of leering imps, or sometimes of mortals drunk with hate. The pictures in the alcoves are not Crucifixions, Transfigurations, Assumptions; they burn darkly forth with meanings far different. Here is the murderer waiting his victim with unsheathed knife—the poisoner crouched beside

the sick man's pillow—the incendiary skulking through shadows reddened by his own sly fusee. Further on is the altar, towering amid dusk, wrought like a scaffold, and aloft in the choir gleam hard and haggard faces, from whose lips float blasphemies too rhythmic to be called mere language, too rancorous to be rated as song. But these unearthly choristers, children of guilt and shame, chant to a rolling and voluminous music borne them from the vast organ, yards beneath, whose gloom-shrouded keys emit strains that throb with irony and revolt. Theirs is melody made from all the viler passions of mankind, and if you hearken intently you may catch in it the cries of the slums and gutters mixed with blander sounds like the soft yet diabolic laughter of refined villainy, or like sneers at everything the world holds sacred put into cadences that might draw shudders from stones. It is music that resembles a gorgeous yet loathsome tissue woven in elfin ways from the iridescence of slime, the smouldering colours of decay, the nests and webs of noxious insects. It is music from which the ears of Baudelaire and Poe might have drunk greedy draughts; it conveys the sense of a frightful and malignant devotion; it means the unconquered mastery of the bestial in man; it loads the heavy and pungent air with memories of Asiatic profligacy, of Greek vice, of wide-sweeping and deathless depravity. From above rises the hellish hymn; from below meets and mingles with it this massively morbid accompaniment. And huddled in dead-black pews before the gaunt altar are men and women whose faces have grown lairs of cruelty and scorn, and whose hands clutch prayer-books whereon the texts of the rubrics glisten as though lettered with blood still wet."

So in my mind, to-night, dawned this fantastic picture. It dawned, then faded, like the airy vision that it was. And afterward, as I have said, slumber fell upon me, and I slept with perfect serenity.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next day Blanche appeared before me in good spirits, and declared herself quite well. "My arm has ceased to pain me," she said. "I haven't a doubt that your remedy worked marvels."

"May it continue to work them!" I answered, with a sarcasm that she was far from suspecting.

A little later I told her the falsehood about Hector which I had planned to tell. She heard me with deep attention, and then suddenly a startled expression crossed her face.

"You're not speaking the truth to me!" she exclaimed.

"How is this, my dear Blanche?"

"Oh, no, no; you are *not!* They've killed Hector, believing him mad. It is too barbarous of them!" And she burst into tears.

But my explanations promptly calmed her, though I wondered why any such effect should spring from them. On the one hand she soon agreed with me that Hughes was not blamable, and on the other she failed to manifest the least sign of fear at learning how imperative had been the necessity of his deed.

"It's horrible to think of Hector as dead," she declared, "but to think of him as mad is still more so. The last I simply *cannot* do. His nature was so loving and gentle!" She stared at the floor a moment, while I watched her with covert keenness. Then, lifting her head, and surveying me with that delicate kind of avidity which the gaze of refined women will sometimes disclose to men whom they love in secret and from whom they long to hear momentous words, "I am certain," she went on, "that you understand my real feeling of bereavement, however others might call it idle and even flippant."

"Of course," I conceded. "Dogs are wonderful beings. And it is more than pleasant to find you so handsomely exempt from all nervous tremors."

"I have none—none," she affirmed. "I prefer not to see the poor creature, but if you will promise me that you will

arrange for his decent burial—a real burial, I mean, and not a horrid casting-away into some pile of offal—I shall be greatly your debtor."

My acquiescence was cordially given, and in a few more hours her request was carried out with a respect which I chose to make markedly punctilious. It was now my desire to leave the Hall, and I somewhat dreaded to put this desire in words. I began by promising that I would soon pay her a visit again, though my intention of not going back to Derbyshire for many future weeks depended on a development which I could not help believing highly doubtful. After all, the departure did not prove so difficult. If Blanche really swallowed her tears she managed to invest this act with much convenient and refreshing heroism. I breathed freer when once in the train, and congratulated myself on having escaped some new anticipated innuendoes from Mrs. Giddings, who chose to spare me (for once, at least) the veiled though trying intelligence that her young friend distractedly cherished me.

Back again in London, I resumed my "mourning" attitude. Now and then I would dine out, if assured beforehand that the dinner would be quiet and informal. The thought of Blanche's possible death gave me little consolation. The chance that it would occur seemed one in a multitude of opposing probabilities. Her avowed longing to squander in charity the fortune which I had aimed at securing irked me with continual annoyance. At length I resolved to go down into Essex and see my Uncle Cecil. This I disliked to do, for now that the strangely charming Olive had vanished to Canada, and only the queer, reptile-loving Angus and the ill-mannered, repulsive Edna remained there, I well knew how charmless Cleeve Lodge must have become.

In these expectations I was not at all disappointed. The estate, small and almost insignificant after such manorial pride and breadth as one found at Graydon, was nevertheless a most winsome haunt of stateliness and ease. I told my kindred, when I suddenly dropped in upon them, one afternoon, that I had come with the idea of staying but a single

night. They received me, however, with all the warmth of which they were evidently capable, and this discovery lent me its due stimulant cheer. The Lodge was full of comforts and touched as well by strong hints of luxury. But its three chief occupants moved before me as if their belongings were in a home of far colder and drearier aspect. Smoking incessantly, as usual, my Uncle Cecil loomed gaunt, haughty and austere. Either moody or else rattlingly loquacious regarding his odious pets, Angus struck me as the sort of human biped one would walk miles to avoid.

Hollow-chested, sullen-eyed, peevish or querulous of voice and manner, Edna was equally distressing. I found in their father a distinct relief from his children, especially on the one evening which belonged to my fleeting visit. We went, after dinner, into his delightful library, a room almost walled with books, except for one or two shadowy corners from which gleamed busts of great dead men in marble and bronze, and a couple of low mullioned windows, exquisitely Elizabethan, beyond which, as I well remembered, lay a garden where Summer would brightly kindle conclaves of hollyhocks and jungles of roses. In the mellow lamplight of this dreamy chamber it struck me that the mien of Uncle Cecil somewhat softened. And yet he spoke on a theme entirely worldly ; I had contrived, with cold premeditation, to prick his avarice and rouse his chagrin.

"The thing will be quite monstrous in Blanche!" he fumed. "To give away the great family property like that! Good Heavens, one almost feels justified in trying to put her under some legal restraint."

"My dear Uncle Cecil," I said, with a show of earnest regret, "I deplore having told you of Blanche's inclinations. My reference to them slipped by the merest accident from my lips——"

"Oh, I know, I know," he broke in. "You, my boy, can have no concern, naturally, with the question of how she chooses to fritter away her father's thousands."

This gave me a deep, furtive diversion. "You mean," I said, with a faint smile, "that I am too far removed from her in the line of any possible legal heirship. Surely you

are right, sir. And for that reason, if none other, I am sorry to have mentioned the matter at all."

Smoking his inalienable cigar, Cecil Mountstuart now puffed from it a huge obscuring volume. "Have no fear, my amiable nephew. I will not quote you."

"Thanks," I returned, meekly.

"But I shall endeavour to—to take measures. The girl must be made to realise her obligations. It is dreadful—I have always thought it dreadful—that this superb property should not be entailed. Blanche's health has always been delicate. She may outlive me; I have slight doubt that she will. But my three children are her next of kin, and of these one or two should, by the law of chance, survive her."

"She may marry," I suggested.

"True—true. If she marries and bears children, everything would of course be altered. But I have somehow never thought her of the marrying kind. And until she does take unto herself a husband, it is only fair——"

At this point the speaker's voice suddenly died in his throat. I saw his head fall backward against the cushion of the large armchair in which he sat.

Had he fainted? I sprang from my seat and hurried toward him. But he revived with as much speed as he had collapsed.

"It's really nothing," he gasped, smiling at me with colourless lips.

"Nothing?" I questioned, picking up the cigar which had fallen from his limp fingers and threatened to leave on the mossy carpet a charred dot.

"I often have these odd attacks. They seem to grow more and more frequent. Was this last one very repelling?"

"Not at all. It was over before I could really say it had happened."

"Yes; the seizures are always sudden and short-lived."

"Have you seen a physician about them?"

"Several times. They rather alarmed me at first, but now I treat them quite as matters-of-course."

"And your physician says?"

"Oh, I've consulted three or four. I never went up to London till about six months ago without visiting a heart specialist, a brain specialist, a specialist of the liver, the kidneys, the digestion. And they have all told me the same story."

"Pray, what was that?"

"I am a wonderfully sound man, considering my years—or, rather, in spite of them."

"Then your complaint is a mystery?"

"Not at all."

My uncle had begun to light a fresh cigar, and after he had done so looked at me with his usual frigid air, except that a few touches of humour, novel and grim, had crept into his face.

"I'm truly at a loss to understand you, my dear uncle," I now said.

"That isn't surprising, Harold. My malady is here." And he took the fresh-lit cigar from his lips, tapping it with the forefinger of his free hand.

"Ah, I see—smoking."

"Yes. It's cigar or pipe with me, from breakfast until bed—sometimes before breakfast, and not seldom after putting my head on the pillow."

"And you will not control the habit?"

Here came a pause. "I don't."

"Yes, I see. You don't choose."

Another pause. "I can't choose."

"You can't choose!" I exclaimed. "How extraordinary! Are you, then, so enslaved by tobacco? It amazes me."

I instantly saw that I had offended him. He was so accustomed to overawe, browbeat, and snub people, that for a moment he forgot his usual *rôle* of semi-courtesy toward myself.

"'Enslaved' is hardly the most civil of words to employ," he replied, with that mincing, nose-in-the-air manner which he used to his servants and not a few of his acquaintances. "Still, I will admit that the weed has got a very strong hold on me—very strong indeed."

I took note of all this. It brought me, in the peculiar circumstances of our present and prospective relations, reminders of my past chemical studies and experiments.

Before quitting Cleeve Lodge the next day, I had seen enough of both Angus and Edna to perceive that both brother and sister were as unengaging as when I had last met them. Edna had a governess who contrasted most pleasantly with Mrs. Giddings; she was frail, blonde and dove-eyed, with a voice like the trebles of a lute. But her pupil, as I need hardly state, led her a dog's life. Miss Ramsdell was treated a good deal worse than most sensible cooks treat their scullions, and why she endured the scowls and sneers of her dark-browed and insolent young companion was explainable, I supposed, on the grounds of poverty and family need. However, I gave this matter slight thought then. Miss Ramsdell seemed to me, during my brief visit, a very saint of resignation and lowlihead, and I did not dream of what new discoveries in her character the lapse of time was fated to furnish me.

Angus, rarely agreeable, had always chosen to show me his best side. I abhorred him, though I never omitted the opportunity of making him think that I liked him. This hypocritic artfulness told with the lad, and I won him over, detestable little Diogenes that he was, with an easy victory. And here I may add that never, save in a single instance, have I failed to attract and even charm any living being whom I have striven to please. That single instance I need not now descant upon. It forms, if I may so allege, the pivotal motive of this curious autobiography, and is intimately allied with the fearful blow—a blow as if dealt me by the vengeful hand of some angered and exasperated Deity—which in due time I shall be forced to chronicle.

Angus, on the morning of my departure, became garrulous about his treasured snakes. Had I studied at all the nature and behaviour of these strange products? No? Would I care to examine his collection? Yes? Then he would be glad to take me through his serpentorium, as he had chosen to name it.

"You'll find my snakes and lizards and toads a good deal

more interesting," he assured me, after I had acquiesced, "than anything you saw in the two Hon. Misses Burgoyne who visited us last evening, with their idiotic young brother, Lord Revelsteyne. I've noticed that a lot of people would like to show their real natures just as snakes do, if only they dared." Here came a shrill little cackle of laughter. "Would you like to see my happy family, Cousin Harold? I'll show you there portraits of all the leading London beauties. I'll show you all the leading English statesmen, too. I've got an immense portrait-gallery. Haven't I, Mr. Towse?"

The last remark was addressed by Angus to his resident tutor, Mr. Towse. This gentleman had the most neutral of demeanours; he seemed to fade into a background the moment you apprehended him as a foreground. He was excessively thin, with a chirp of a voice like a wounded cricket's, and you saw his large blue eyeglasses before you saw his attenuated face. "Angus has had six tutors in the last seven months," Edna had lately informed me, with a dismal and fragmentary chuckle. "Nobody can stand him." (I wondered, while she thus vented her spleen on Angus, how Miss Ramsdell had been able to stand *her*.) "Mr. Towse is papa's hope and despair combined. He says that if Angus quarrels with that stainless nonentity, he shall never be permitted to enter college. But of course he *will* quarrel with Mr. Towse in a few more weeks, and insist on his being sent away. I often ask myself whether Angus has ever actually liked anything except it were a snake. He ought to have one for a tutor. They say serpents are wise; I wish those that he broods among would lend him a little of their wisdom."

But in spite of Angus's pictorial and satiric description of his uncanny favourites, I declined, on this occasion, to walk through the "serpentorium."

"What dreadful taste of you!" Angus cried, in his piping tones. "I've a good mind not to let you see my monstrous boa-constrictor when he arrives from Brazil. He's to be the largest specimen ever imported into this country."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed; "what can you possibly do with a prodigy like that?"

"Enjoy his majestic society immensely. These creatures, I am told, are often tamable. Mine shall have a chamber all to himself, with a huge tree in it to coil on. I've been thinking of a name for him, and have just decided on Caligula."

"A new Caligula," I thought, "just as I'm a new Nero."

"That particular emperor was such an exceptional devil," shrilled Angus.

"But you don't want your serpent to be a devil?"

"Yes." The pale, narrow face was so swayed by a decisive nod of affirmation that its sharp chin almost touched the shirt-bosom of its possessor. "Yes, I *do* want him to be a devil—that is, to everybody except myself."

"Oh, you draw a line then. That is merciful."

"Don't be sarcastic," snapped my cousin. "Leave that to me. You handsome people gain more by going through life amiably. Ugly, horrid, wizened creatures like myself are heirs presumptive to the domain of satire. We know how to till the ground and raise good crops from it—crops of nettles that can sting everybody we're jealous of; and we're jealous of everybody who isn't dwarfish and hasn't just escaped a hunch." Here he laughed in a cackling falsetto, and put out a slim, bloodless hand to bid me farewell.

"He's clever, that odd, malicious atom," I thought afterward. "His sister is merely a disagreeable fool. He has brains. But he is so packed with spite and spleen that one almost might doubt if the sting of his ugliest snake would poison him."

Having rid myself, with relieved sensations, of Cleeve Lodge, I mused, in my London chambers, upon the real and valuable effects of my visit. Uncle Cecil would certainly seek to dissuade Blanche from the project which she meditated. I had sown in him the seed of dissension and discontent, and practicable fruit would doubtless result from my effort. Blanche might heartily enough dislike her uncle, but his appeals, notwithstanding, would carry weight.

In any case, they would be better than my own expostulations or objections.

But I soon found that my uncle had coolly played me false. He had gone to Graydon Hall, seen Blanche, and told her that I had been shocked by her intention of doling out her fine fortune in alms and benefactions. A kind of quarrel had ensued, if it may be said that the gentle Blanche ever quarrelled with anybody. The young heiress presently wrote me, not in reproach but in revelation. One sentence of her letter ran thus: "I recognise Uncle Cecil's claim, of course, to express resentment and to create opposition, yet pray believe me when I state, dear Harold, that if I had believed *you* were appreciably adverse to the purpose which I mentioned, this fact of your disapproval would have influenced me far more than all our uncle's haughty scolding and rebuke."

Here was my opportunity. I sat down and wrote my cousin a letter in which I averred that my disclosures to the master of Cleeve Lodge had been purely casual and fortuitous, and that I regretted greatly his having hinted I was in the least dismayed or chagrined. "How, my dear Blanche," I proceeded, "could your spending of your fortune as you saw fit possibly concern myself in any vital degree? I am not your heir-at-law, and between me and any such condition of things intervene at the present moment no less than four lives. But in spite of whatever harshness Uncle Cecil may have used toward you, I cannot help remembering the traditions of our ancient family, and in a measure sympathising with him, for this reason. Though unentailed, the property has for generations descended, as you know, precisely according to those laws which would govern its inheritance if entail and titles were both connected with it. Therefore, if you should ask me in what direction lay your duty as to the disposition of its principle, apart from the annual income it yields you, I should be compelled to answer that you could take no wiser and juster course than in adhering to the old Mountstuart traditions." From diplomatic suggestions like this, I soon glided into frank and friendly counsel,

sure that every arrow I deftly aimed would stand a fair chance of hitting the mark.

Meanwhile I mutely cursed my uncle for having dragged me into this unwelcome correspondence. What I wrote Blanche prevailed with her, as an answering letter soon assured me ; yet it had not been my policy to put myself on record, howsoever non-comittally, with regard to the affair of her projected disbursements. A postscript in Blanche's communication begged me to run down again to Graydon Hall, if only for a night. I did not choose to go, and pleaded as my excuse an approaching trip to Paris. This trip I took a few days later ; but one lovely spring morning, while I sat sipping my coffee near a window of my apartment in the Hotel Meurice, and watching the bloomful chestnut-trees in the Gardens of the Tuileries just opposite, another letter from Blanche was handed me.

I read it with amazement. It was little else than an offer of marriage on the part of my cousin. I could scarcely believe my own eyesight. She did not actually ask me to marry her, but the meaning of her proposal was perfectly clear. "I wish," she wrote, "that I could give you my entire property, to manage as you saw fit. I would gladly do so if the world would not pass cruel comments upon the act : its tongue is often stinging, and although between us the blood-relationship is close, a relationship still closer would be expected, even demanded as well." This was not the only sentence that brimmed with reminder and suggestion. "A girl of my youth and inexperience," I elsewhere read, "is so completely unsuited for the management of a large property like this of mine, that she may esteem herself richly blessed if able to repose all future responsibility in one whom she both honours and loves." This was perhaps the most florid portion of the whole disclosure. It set me brooding once more upon the question of whether, after all, a marriage with Blanche might not be my most sensible step. And now that she literally offered me her full fortune if I would become her husband, had I not every reason for reconsidering my abandoned purpose ?

No. As I looked out upon merry Paris, that delicious vernal morning, the bright city seemed to give me an adequate response. Marriage with any woman whom I had ever met would be a burden and a tedium. Here, in this gay metropolis, dwelt the very liberty that I loved. Intensified here, as though I had sought it and communed with it in its own native lair, I seemed to find upon its gladsome face the veto that would save me from untold bondage. True, I might wed Blanche, receive from her the untrammelled ownership of Graydon Hall and every other pound of property she now held, afterward making myself a widower with as much combined skill and expedition as I could jointly master. But here was precisely the sort of crime that my discretion shrank from committing. Thus far I had saved myself from the faintest semblance of accusation. Into what chasm of it might I not plunge by becoming first the spouse of Blanche and then her murderer? The Essex Mountstuarts would hate and distrust me the moment such a union was announced. Later Cecil Mountstuart would watch me with inimical eyes, even if he had no dream that I was capable of killing Blanche. Thus far my prudence had been prodigious, and my success unrivalled. The methods and the apparent motives of an ordinary criminal had lain aloof from my peculiar career. Whatever might be said of it in the way of infamy, at least it had not fallen into the list of vulgar deviltries. What I had done I had certainly done with originality and acumen. I had not only left no tracks behind me, but I had made the search for such tracks the very last thing in the world that any sane person would think of. This, indeed, was the pith of the problem I had set myself to solve: how a human being could secure an enormous property by *murdering his way* straight through the obstruction of seven distinct heirs, and yet find himself at the victorious hour a citizen of flawless repute, without one living soul on earth to charge against him the commission of a single venial fault in achieving this unprecedented end.

Some little time later I wrote Blanche a reply which seemed to me, after I had carefully perused it, the essence

of diplomatic deceit. I pretended, in this reply, that I had not the vaguest conjecture she had wished to marry me, and I again spoke of my trip into the East, as though I might start upon it without returning to London. Every hint that she had given me regarding my potential possessorship of her property by swearing marital vows to her, I deliberately and shrewdly misinterpreted. The whole epistle was a masterpiece of seeming innocence and hypocritic sympathy. I congratulated myself upon it when I scanned, with critical eyes, the "Very affectionately, your cousin" that gleamed at the bottom of its final page.

Paris was full of social pleasures for me at that season, if I had chosen to enjoy them. But I preferred to mantle myself with the "good taste" of recognising recent family bereavements. Meanwhile diversions of another sort could be secured, and of these I availed myself without stint. Nowhere is there a city in which men (and perhaps women, too) can give so lax a rein as in Paris to their most depraved instincts without peril of being discovered and gossiped about. Three weeks now elapsed for me in follies and pastimes of which I would not have dared run the risk had London surroundings made them possible. Yet they did not, with all their subtly opiate influences, drug me into forgetfulness of a certain aim and longing. I had found leisure, during my stay, to pore over some rare medical French books at that wondrous national library in the Rue de Richelieu, and from these I had gathered facts which struck me as disheartening enough with respect to my fiendish little attempt upon the life of my cousin. Two more months would undoubtedly decide, and go far beyond deciding, the result of that attempt. In the meantime some new expedient must be thought out, some fresh and safe death-dealing design. But I began to tell myself, with a pang of humiliation, that I was, after all, less viciously inventive than I had supposed. Or did life here bubble on every side with too prismatic a buoyance? Perhaps, I concluded, a more sober environment would change all this.

But suddenly a telegram reached me from Mrs. Giddings.

It bore the same address as that which I had given when I last wrote her pupil.

"In Heaven's name," it ran, "do come here as soon as you can manage. Blanche is seriously and very strangely ill. I fear that something terrible will soon happen."

Immediately I telegraphed back: "Will be with you as soon as steam can bring me. Am stunned and sorrow-stricken by your message."

CHAPTER X.

JOURNEYING with scarcely the least intermission, I reached Graydon Hall just at nightfall. A new moon hung in a primrose-tinted west, and dulcet evening winds fluted among the fresh May foliage of the majestic park. In a bosk I heard a nightingale singing. The many-turreted, many-windowed pile gradually rose before me, as I lay back in the carriage which brought me from the station, with an effect of delightful spectacular trickery. The scents that floated to my nostrils were those of blossoming hedge-rows, young dew-bathed grasses, tender earthly exhalations, revivified stalks, roots, and boughs. I could not describe them; I could only let their beloved English rural freshness penetrate and please me. They gave me thoughts of how the brooks not far away must be gurgling in loosened silver, of how the mated birds among near groves were seeking downy and leaf-screened nests, of how the shadowy cloisters of orchards were canopied with flowery promises that autumn fruitage would fulfil.

For a while my happy and sensuous reverie caused me quite to forget the young girl who was perhaps dying a frightful death caused by my own hand. Remembering this probable fact as the carriage rolled up to the portals of Graydon, I think it likely that I may have visibly yawned. Yet no one saw me; of that I felt sure. My captivation by the magic forces of nature on this perfect spring evening was complete, and I am certain that their dreamy sorceries enthralled me with as holy a spell as though addressing a

spirit unstained by the slightest sin. Such was my temperament, my organism, my essential fabric. I do not deny that it presented the most soulless conceivable aspect; but I insist upon here repeating that the moral monstrosity which I had now become stood for a distinct consequence of Atheism affecting this particular kind of human character definable as Harold Mountstuart. There are men to whom, in this age of strange uprootings and transitions, the surrender of all faith in a Divine Guardian can only mean irreligion and not non-religion. Born a century or so earlier, I might have dedicated to goodness every quality and talent of my heart and mind. Born in an age of doubt, and carrying doubt well beyond the limit of ungodliness, I had become precisely the caitiff I now appear. Every great mental and physical change in mankind generates a curious minority of beings altogether divergent from what were supposedly its clear results. The Christian faith which engendered St. Augustine also created Torquemada. The scientific scepticism whose progeny is a Bacon, a Voltaire, a Payne, a Spencer, has also given rise to myself.

Scarcely had I alighted from my vehicle when Mrs. Giddings met me on the porch. Both her frail and yellow hands clutched me by the arm; so strangled and feeble was her voice that the first words she spoke were all one shuddering fragment of jargon.

We passed together into the stately old sitting-room, from whose walls gleamed dead-and-gone Mountstuarts, a few of them in ruffs and plumed hats. Over the big carved mantel gleamed a lady in a white gown who oddly resembled Blanche.

The act was not an easy one (since Mrs. Giddings had always been physically repulsive to me), but I really gave her something that resembled an affectionate caress as I now said:

"Pray try to compose yourself. I will wait until you are quieter. There; sit down, and let me chafe your hands. That is better."

"You're—so good, so kind," she presently quavered.

"Don't think of it. Now, tell me—is Blanche still alive?"

"Yes."

"Is she very ill?"

"Horribly!"

"Who is with her now?"

Dr. Strangford, and two—two London doctors, who got here this morning. Besides these——"

"Well?" I questioned, when her voice had broken with a kind of click, as though her parched throat would not let it pass. Besides these——?"

"There are three men who—who have to hold her while she's racked by the most awful spasms. Oh, Mr. Mountstuart—Harold—her sufferings—her sufferings!"

"They're so great? Poor Blanche! And what is the disease?"

"Hydrophobia."

"Good God!" I said, turning pale, but not because I was in the least shocked. My hopes were then realised! Who has ever heard of any one thus afflicted not sooner or later dying? I had studied the whole subject very exhaustively in Paris, and learned that no recovery, in a genuine case of this infernal malady, has yet been recorded.[1]

"I recollect," were my next words, "the dog-bite that she received when I was last here."

"Yes—it was that."

"How unspeakably dreadful! But may the physicians not have mistaken her symptoms?"

"No. One of them is a famous specialist. He says there isn't a shadow of doubt. At first I—I laughed at her. She even laughed at herself; she was not in the least nervous. That was five or six days ago. She used great self-control."

"Poor child—poor child!"

"But the wound on her arm grew red and burned her. It had entirely healed; she had ceased to give it a thought. Then came darting pains through other parts of her body. Still she showed great courage. She strove against the dreadful melancholia that oppressed her, and sought remedies to ease her raging headache. On three or four

[1] The preventive and successful measures of Pasteur were then undiscovered.

successive mornings she told me that her nights had been terrific, and that if they went on like this they would end in madness. And once, as she uttered that word 'madness,' her eyes met mine with a wild look, and she flung herself weeping into my arms. But those were the last tears that she ever shed; a restless fire began to consume her soon afterward. She could not remain in one spot more than three minutes at a time. She roamed this great house from room to room, I following in transports of alarm. It was now that I insisted on sending for Dr. Strangford, whom thus far she had refused to see. He prevailed upon her to retire to bed. In less than another hour her first convulsion occurred. Since then her agony has been almost incessant. Poor Dr. Strangford lost his head, at first. So did I lose mine; and with the servants, bewildered and dismayed, it was the same. There seemed some hope when the London doctors were finally at her bedside. But they refuse to state that she has the least chance of life. I don't know, I don't know," finished Mrs. Giddings wailingly, "but all that these great authorities do, as far as I can possibly perceive, is to watch my poor darling die, and not to relieve her pain one iota. And oh, *such* pain! If you saw her—— But I forget; you *must* see her! She constantly asks for you when there is a lull in her torments. Poor martyr, she waits for you, expects you. Go to her at once—you know the way. Go to her, that is, if you dare to look upon her misery."

"And will not you come also?" I asked.

"Oh, I dare not—I dare not. It would kill me if I stayed there one hour longer. When a change takes place—when those heart-breaking convulsions grow quieter, then I will see her again. But *now!*" Mrs. Giddings drooped back in her chair and covered with both hands her twitching and hueless face.

A little later I had pushed my way into Blanche's chamber. The two London physicians frowned upon me; Dr. Strangford gave me a cold, timid hand. The men guarding my cousin glanced at me with eyes that seemed to say, "You will make our task harder by daring to come here."

Blanche lay with closed eyelids, her face duskily pallid. I sank down on my knees at the verge of her bed. And then I did a stupid thing, which might easily have cost me my life. Reaching out my own hand, I took one of hers, limp and waxen.

"My poor, dear Blanche!" I murmured. "I'm so wretchedly grieved to see you as ill as this! I——"

"Be careful!" shot a voice from one of the attendants. At the same time my hand was dashed from the sick girl's, and I saw that the watcher who had thus acted wore a heavy protective glove. And now, in another instant, I gazed at the full horror of hydrophobia; for Blanche, leaping up in bed with maniac looks, made snarling, snapping motions of the head, her teeth bared to their upper gums and a whitish mucus oozing from the corners of her mouth. I sprang to my feet while three pairs of hands clutched her, with all the mercy that could be shown, yet with an energy her fierce struggles made imperative. A new convulsion had begun, and with much curiosity and not a little secret interest I surveyed the torture which she underwent. The disease would be in no wise worse than many others, were it not for the continued consciousness and rationality of the patient. I was told afterward that the unhappy girl had not slept for three days and three nights, and that through all this interval she had maintained as complete knowledge of everything which passed about her as though she had been in perfect health.

Her show of physical strength was now purely prodigious. If I had not beheld I would not have believed. Hoarse, guttural shouts left her frothing lips, and through these, hearing in them my own name, I became aware that she had recognised me. Exceptionally weak woman though she was, her muscular powers bordered almost upon the miraculous; she flung off one of the sturdy men who tried to hold her down, so that he reeled backward against the wall. We have all heard or read of the cries given by lost souls in hell; no human fancy could have conjured any sound better suited to such a similitude. And her dilated eyeballs, which soon fixed themselves upon myself, made the strained voice

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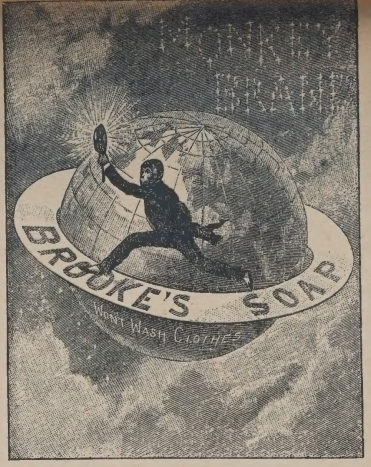
&c.,
Brooke's
We cannot do without it-Though it "Won't Wash Clothes."

THE WORLD'S
MOST MARVELLOUS
Cleanser and Polisher

MAKES TIN LIKE SILVER,
COPPER LIKE GOLD,
PAINT LIKE NEW,
SPOTLESS EARTHENWARE,
CROCKERY LIKE MARBLE,
MARBLE WHITE,
BRASS WARE LIKE MIRRORS



We cannot do without it-Though it "Won't Wash Clothes."

ring still more sepulchral. In a little while I knew that she was imploring me (most amazing of earthly ironies !) to kill her.

"Oh, Harold—Harold—please let them give me something to end this anguish ! You're so good—you've always been so good—I've loved you so, Harold ! Pity me, now—have mercy and end my tortures ! Oh, I can't tell you what they are ! Harold ! Don't you hear ? Let them smother me if they'll do nothing else ! Crush my life out *yourself*, Harold, in pure pity ! I'll bless you if you'll only give me death ! I'm not afraid to die, Harold. It will be bliss beside this agony ! "

Her voice ceased, after a few more frantic writhings. Apparent coma came again. I turned away, pretending to be overpowered, and stood face to face with one of the London physicians, Dr. Armitage, a man of great fame, whose clear-cut, intellectual face had grown ghastly in its pallor.

"For God's sake," I whispered, "give her morphine ! Why not ? "

"We cannot," he replied, his composure just hiding, and no more, an intense agitation.

"You mean it would be death ? "

"Yes."

"But death will come."

He bowed gravely. "There is always a chance."

"But it is infinitely small."

He looked at me with sudden keenness. "You know of this frightful disease, then ? "

"I have read about it," I replied. "The investigation of it once fascinated me—a good while ago."

"Ah, yes. I see. Then you are aware, Mr. Mountstuart, that such a narcotic could not possibly be curative. And it is my business to cure, not to kill."

"But her suffering——"

"Is immeasurable." He took out his watch and glanced at it. "Still, this convulsion may perhaps be the last. It was not quite so fearful as the one which preceded it."

"Not so fearful ? Really ? "

"No—in spite of your presence here, which we dreaded as a new and cogent irritant. The *medulla oblongata* (that portion of the nervous axis where brain and spinal cord meet) has passed its most violent stage of excitation, and hence those distressing spasms of the pharynx and larynx have grown less acute. I observe, too, that the general hyperæsthesia—morbid sensibility to light draughts of air, odours, or sounds—has plainly diminished."

"And horror of water?" I inquired.

"It is a mythic symptom, though it gave the name to this sad affliction. I do not mean that she has not shown it, but she has equally shown a horror of many other things. Judging from her temperature, which is now very high, I should say that paralysis will shortly ensue in the respiratory and circulatory centres."

"Pray Heaven that it may!" I faltered. "Poor, dear child! I never dreamed that I should really *wish* for her death!"

The physician's prophecy proved a true one. After a much feebler convulsion Blanche again sank into inertia, never rallying until she ceased to breathe, about two hours from the time of my arrival.

The end had scarcely occurred when my uncle Cecil appeared at Graydon Hall. As he soon explained, he had been in the south of England when Mrs. Giddings's recent note was delivered to him. He seemed fearfully shocked. I watched him with secret vigilance, but could discern no sign other than that of profound consternation and sorrow. Till long past midnight we sat together, the two London physicians having retired in utter fatigue, and Dr. Strangford having been driven home.

Stimulant was provided us by the servants, and of this I partook sparingly, while my uncle scarcely tasted it. He smoked, however, with more than his usual ardour. As he consumed cigar after cigar I asked myself if tobacco had ever known a more abject slave.

Our conversation was at first languid and full of pauses. But finally something that I said roused him, and his mien grew haughtily contradictory.

"I do not understand you," he said, "unless you would wish to deny the existence of a merciful Deity."

I smiled. "And you have preserved your faith in one, my dear uncle?"

"Preserved it?" he echoed. "You amaze me. I really resent your question, Harold. Because horrible sufferings do exist in the world, should I therefore lose faith in an all-wise Omnipotence?"

I felt, somehow, in an expansive mood. "That, Uncle Cecil, is your own affair. All that I have sought to urge is one fact: the tremendous human capacity for suffering, and its hideous practical exploitation through centuries. Hydrophobia is perhaps as torturing a disease as any which has scourged us; but we have been forced to confront others, like cancer, leprosy, the various forms of brain-tumour, and such incurable neuralgic affections as whiten the hair and palsy the limbs. I select only those which are most lingering, and there are many more. Then comes pain of another sort which we have endured by multitudes. We have been buried alive in different ways—ecclesiastic wrath has walled us in crypts where we might split our throats with shrieks only to have darkness and solitude respond; pest has caused us to be nailed living in coffins and flung into graves, where our moment of wakening, even if it were a moment only, was packed with such frenzy as the pencil of a Doré could not draw; and finally, falling buildings have closed about us, maimed and yet conscious, in whose hateful caverns we have gasped until the help that sought to exhume us has arrived only to find us corpses."

"What ghastliness you are talking!" here exclaimed my uncle.

"Do I exaggerate in the faintest degree? Poor Blanche's fate has set me thinking, as you perceive. I pass over the sufferings wrought by bereavement — those ills which we often call 'common to the race,' but which rack the quivering souls of parents, husbands, wives, and lovers. But there is shipwreck, which has not done its darkest work by merely drowning us; by not drowning us it has accomplished more. We have been picked up after tossing for days in mid-ocean

with only a spar to clutch and hug; we have glared at one another on rafts with the eyes of devouring beasts, and stabbed or brained one another to suck the blood and chew the flesh of our own kind, while the monstrous and sailless ocean swung round us and mocked our unslaked thirst."

"Harold! This is sickening!"

"In Judæa and in Rome we have by thousands been crucified—a death of unparalleled pain. In Asiatic lands we have been impaled countless times—a death no less frightful. China has for years had a mode of punishing us which consists in slowly, very slowly, cutting us to pieces, first an ear, then an eyelid, then a finger, then a slice from the buttock, breast or shoulder, till we shiver the bleeding and awful caricatures of ourselves, yet still sentient, still undenied the longed-for *coup*. Nero, an artist in cruelty, bound us and hoisted us on poles, when we had the misfortune to be early Christians, and then smeared our lower limbs with inflammable tar. Afterward he set fire to us, and as we were placed along the handsome gardens of his villas, at regular distances apart, our flames made fine torches at his festivals and our screams doubtless pleased him with unique though somewhat Wagnerian music. And others besides himself gave us, nude and trembling before myriads of cold eyes, to the fangs of hungry lions. And so the appalling tragedy has gone on. If we have not been called upon to suffer by the curious and problematic malice of nature, we have been victimised quite as remorselessly by our fellow-men."

Here I gave a sad little laugh, and while lighting a fresh cigarette, continued:

"But of course any one can make these reflections. In one sense they *are* sickening, as you say; in another they are wholesome, since they direct our minds toward actuality, and teach us that the idea of an unseen Deity, working for our good rather than our harm, is a fable founded upon fear."

"This," frowned my listener, "is rank atheism."

"I know a good deal of piety, uncle, that is very rank. 'It smells to heaven.'"

"We cannot understand the mystery of human suffering.

I grant you that. But we must be content with waiting for an explanation of it beyond the grave."

"That reminds me," I said, again smiling, "of the man who declared he enjoyed having the gout because each new attack of it gave him a fresh mortgage on Paradise."

Uncle Cecil's frown deepened, and I soon changed the current of our talk. After all, I concluded, my discourse had been horridly ill-advised. But I had yielded to a kind of perverse impulse in delivering it; for, as I had grown well aware by this time, the cynicism if not the irreligion of his son, Angus, had formed a sharp contrast with my own geniality, and perhaps had caused him to like me a good deal better on this account. And I wanted him to go on liking me. Any prejudice against me might stand in the way of his desiring my future presence at Cleeve Lodge, and to repeat my last visit there was now a coming necessity. For Cecil Mountstuart stood next upon my list, fourth of the doomed seven, three of whom I had already sent from earth with a dexterity which it gave me thrills of triumph to review.

I now conceived the plan of not being present at Blanche's funeral, but to feign an illness that would make all the tenants and acquaintances of the deceased explain my absence in pitying terms. It would be easier, I argued, to lie in bed and partially starve myself there, than to appear for the third time at a funeral of one of my own kindred within a space that was relatively so brief, and to assume the looks and manners of a mourner in circumstances which would demand that my grief should be still more excessive and solemn. Accordingly, on the following morning, I underwent a severe attack of nervous exhaustion and summoned Dr. Strangford, telling him that on attempting to rise I had swooned away and must have remained unconscious for nearly an hour. Luckily I had not brought my valet with me to Graydon, otherwise he might have suspected this tale as apocryphal. That Dr. Strangford did not so suspect it was no surprise to me; he felt my pulse, assured me that the sensations I described were by no means peculiar, considering my rapid journey from Paris and the

severe strain afterward endured, and advised me by all means to remain in bed for at least the rest of that day.

I remained there till the fuss and flurry of the funeral were entirely over. My uncle visited me twice, but did not stay long, chiefly, I believe, for the reason that I had seen in his hand a half-smoked cigar when he first presented himself at my bedside, and had plaintively begged him not to smoke in my chamber, as I felt sure it would bring on an attack of faintness. I also begged him not to let either Angus or Edna see me (they both arrived from their Essex home in time for the funeral), greatly though I desired to greet them once again. I suspected that Uncle Cecil gave a smile of furtive grimness at this last injunction. But he promised to obey it, and as a consequence I was not annoyed by the peering gaze and harsh deportment of my two cousins. Other relations, as I learned later, expressed the desire to come and condole with me on my illness; and an old servant who had been at Mountstuart since his boyhood informed me, on the morning after Blanche's burial, while he handed me my chicken-broth, that the fact of my being invalided like this had caused nearly as much comment "as the poor young corpse itself."

This kind of popular saliency was just what I desired. When I "felt better," and was "able to appear downstairs," the great house had grown quiet again, except for Mrs. Giddings's occasional hysteric wails. This forlorn lady was left quite penniless and alone by Blanche's death; for when, a little later, the question arose as to whether the dead heiress had left any will it was discovered that, unlike her brother Egerton, she had died intestate.

"And what wonder?" I said to Uncle Cecil, with throbs of deep seeming emotion in my voice. "The poor girl never dreamed of dying for years yet, and doubtless would not have done so if this dark disaster had not fallen upon her. All that she had now goes to you, uncle, and to your children after you. But if you will permit me, sir, to offer one slight yet well-meant bit of counsel, I would suggest that faithful old Mrs. Giddings were assured some sort of decent provision in her declining years."

To this proposal my uncle gave ready assent; and I may here add that the rest of the old lady's existence was one of ease if no more. It lasted but a few months longer, however, and only a brief time before her death from the third stroke of paralysis, a dictated letter reached me, in which she "blessed" me very amply and prettily for having been the kindly intercessor between herself and the present master of Graydon Hall. "I bless you also," ran another sentence, "for having so mercifully hurried to poor Blanche, since she loved you with a great love, and whatever may have been her torments at the last, I am sure that in a measure they were lessened by knowledge of your nearness."

As this document had in its opening lines informed me that the sender owed to Blanche's horrible death her fatal illness and own approaching end, I could not but regard it with curious concern. Here was I, in all probability the murderer of my cousin, and no doubt the cause of this old lady's mortal distemper as well, receiving from Blanche's dearest friend and adherent words replete with gratitude and loving-kindness. I smoked a fragrant cigar over the epistle, re-perusing it several times. The exquisite sarcasm of the whole situation diverted me greatly.

But long before this I had left Graydon Hall, gone back to London, and resolved upon my Eastern trip. Meanwhile the most marked tide of condolence swept in upon me. My London acquaintanceship charitably resented the seclusion into which family calamity had so cruelly forced me. "It is not fair," said one feminine friend, "that you should be thus incessantly barred from all social enjoyments."

"You forget," I answered, "that the sorrow of these repeated losses must put me in no mood for gaiety."

Again a friend of my own sex urged me: "It will not be thought in the least bad form, my dear Harold, if you seek distraction from this gloom of affliction that has fallen upon you. That you should live like a hermit, now at the height of the London season, is unfair both to yourself and to the many admirers whom your wit and charm have secured for you."

"Dear Reginald," I returned, "you forget that I *feel* like a hermit. My uncle was very dear to me—as dear, I imagine, as is now your own father, the Earl. Though I knew Egerton Mountstuart somewhat ill, I was wretchedly smitten by his brutal murder. And as for my cousin Blanche, I need not tell you how perfect a little saint she was, how I reverenced the very ground she walked on, and how her strange, agonising death has for the present put me at odds with all thought of mirthful living."

These are but two samples of my "fine speeches." I made a good many more, and felt quite a victorious glow when I had succeeded in shedding several real tears during a visit from the young Duke of Westhampton, accompanied by that elderly but radiant star of fashion, Mr. Wymberly Wyllys.

My uncle Cecil came to see me, quite unexpectedly, during the early weeks in June. He was just as haughty and austere as ever, though I could not but notice that his old liking for me still was regnant.

I indeed ventured to ask if my infidel notions had shocked him past forgiveness, and instead of receiving the chill rebuff which I knew he was such an adept at giving, I merely met a toss of the small, high-held head and a fluttering of the arrogant eyelids.

"Don't let us talk of that, my dear boy. It's positively terrifying the way in which all of our younger generation is running to radicalisms. By the by, Harold, *have* you a cigar? I am forced to confess that I haven't one left, and that I neglected to stop my cab for some as I passed through Piccadilly."

Instantly I apologised and rang or my servant. In the box of cigars he produced lay a score or so of very flavorous weeds, and my uncle had soon showed his appreciation of their quality by consuming several at avid speed. I could not help at length saying: "Your love for tobacco still enthralls you, I see."

"Oh, yes," he replied, "and always will. I imagine that I shall need a cigar on my deathbed—if I ever die slowly enough to have a deathbed."

"And those attacks?" I asked. "Are they less frequent now?"

"Decidedly." He laughed his bleak, dry laugh. "I'm beginning to fancy that I've smoked them away." He at once changed the subject and began talking of his son. "Is it not too bad that that Angus persists in remaining at Cleeve Lodge?"

"He prefers Essex, I think you said."

"He prefers his abominable snakes. In one way it *is* better that he should have all the house to himself, for that 'serpentorium,' as he rather sillily calls it, made a most distressing annex while I was there. I used to think I heard the creatures hiss when I slept ill, and then there was always the latent dread that one of them would get loose and come wriggling through one of the doorways or be found coiled on one of the sofa-cushions. Of course I would not hear of the beastly collection being brought to Graydon. And so, as if to revenge himself, Angus stays quartered with his slimy idols. Well, let him, if he pleases. There's no mending his ways. He's quarrelled with Mr. Towse, though I believe that was partly Edna's fault. She took a dislike to that blameless person and induced Angus to irritate him into leaving. Towse was my last hope for Angus, and now he's gone to Melbourne with a rich Australian who was here on a visit. Angus is at present tutorless, and will never go to college, will never be anything but an eccentric dunce. Oh, my children, Harold, are a sad pair!" And Uncle Cecil heaved a great nervous sigh. I felt the mighty compliment of his confiding sentences. Few others besides myself had ever seen him unbend thus graciously.

"Edna is living with you at the Hall?" I asked.

"Yes."

"She prefers it to her former home?"

Here my uncle departed from me, as it were, in a smoke-cloud, and then reappeared wearing a look of tired disdain. "Really, Harold," he said, "I am very bad at keeping account of Edna's caprices."

"They're so numerous, then?"

"They're the sands of the seashore. How even that meek

Miss Ramsdell puts up with her the early Christian martyrs could possibly have explained, but these alone. However, in ordinary justice to Edna, it should be said the occupancy of Cleeve Lodge must in any case have been made revolting by that new horror which Angus has domesticated there."

"You mean——?"

"Oh, I mean his abominable snake from Brazil."

"It has arrived, then?"

"It has arrived, and it is the hugest sort of python, and (worst of all!) it is tame."

"Tame? A South American boa?"

"Actually. Angus has given it a small apartment quite to itself, but now and then he leads it forth, when not in one of its post-prandial torpid states, among its housed companions. A few weeks ago he presumed to do more than this. He brought it into the morning-room where Edna and Miss Ramsdell were seated. Their shrieks resound yet in my ears whenever I feel specially nervous. It came undulating across the threshold, with its big head erected, and both ladies were nearly driven mad with fright, Edna just escaping the most serious results. Angus," ended my uncle, with abrupt solemnity, "will make a strange master for the Mountstuart estates. And I suspect he will very soon succeed to them."

"How gloomy an outlook!" I exclaimed. "You can't mean what you're saying."

"I do—I do." He shivered palpably here, and surprised me by laying down his cigar. All his habitual pride of manner had gone; a kind of scared sadness lit his eyes. "For that matter, Harold, there seems a curse on the very name. Three of us to be swept away in a few months!" He paused, laughing joylessly. "Possibly it means that we shall go on perishing till *you're* the heir. Such things have happened, I believe."

"And such a thing shall happen again," I said to my own thoughts. But aloud: "Oh, uncle, don't cherish these bat-like fancies. They borrow their hues, I fear, from the dusk of the tobacco-leaf."

"Perhaps," he returned, moodily. "I sometimes think

that I will make a mighty effort, before long, and say good-bye to it for ever."

"Pray do so," I answered, rising and laying my hand upon his arm. I used my most persuasive and kindly look, which had always won and charmed people, and which wrought now its usual captivating effect.

This autocratic kinsman of mine, so supercilious with almost everybody who approached him, stretched forth his hand and warmly clasped my own. "The effort," I continued, "will not be half so strenuous as you anticipate. After a few days of abstinence you will begin to delight in the consequences of your own self-control. I am sure that I am right, dear uncle. Trust me—and try!"

"I will—I will, dear boy!"

The fervour and feeling of this answer surprised me, accompanied as it was with a renewed pressure of my hand. And in another second, to my increased amazement, I saw that the speaker's eyes—often so hard and chilling—had become misted with actual tears. Meanwhile the last earthly thing that I desired was the very reform I had just counselled. For already a distinct plan had occurred to me of killing this, my fourth victim, by means of the same vice which I had now so openly deplored. However, I felt securely certain that he neither would nor could alter his mode of living. My wistful and tender bit of admonition was, after all, a safe stroke of hypocrisy; and to play the hypocrite with success and impunity was always a course of action that gave me strong furtive thrills of piercing pleasure.

CHAPTER XI.

My plan, however, must not be carried out for a good while to come. On taking leave of Uncle Cecil I had already determined that a year should elapse before I became the agent of his extinction (euphonious name for his murderer, was it not?), and when I began to reflect in solitude upon this determination, I grew more and more

convinced of its neat if devilish shrewdness. The Mountstuart death-roll had been hastily enough called already. I was still young ; a year was not long for me to wait, in spite of impatience to call myself lord of those noble acres. True, if I gave to Angus, to Edna, and finally to Olive, each a year apiece, the term of expectancy would prove tedious past conception. But such a policy need by no means be preferred. Let me call my whole deadly design, if I chose, a drama in seven acts. All dramas, when played, have at least one *entr'acte* of longer duration than those which precede or follow it.

How, then, should I pass this interim ? What should I do that would correspond to going out into one of the lobbies and smoking a leisurely cigarette ? My lobby, I soon concluded, should mean Egypt, India, and other Oriental climes ; and as for my cigarette, that should be symboled by the zest with which I enjoyed these lazy and colourful wanderings.

As it turned out, I spent no more than six months in Eastern lands, coming back from Bombay when London was clad with dolorous fogs. The truth had been that my tastes as a traveller were too luxurious for my moderate income. The gorgeousness of those barbaric countries, all the richer because of the squalor which one found allied with it, provoked alike envy and *ennui*. At the same time, if I may presume upon the statement, I felt an added effect of demoralisation, and returned, so to speak, more callously wicked than when I had gone. All the monuments of perished splendour beheld in my travels were so many living proofs that human destiny was the voidest and vainest of trivialities. What mattered it if history wrote her chronicles in blood and tears ? A few centuries more or less, and was not the whole scripture one shadowy blur ? Who then could tell the base deeds from the heroic, the turpitude of the tyrant from the sacrifice of the saint ? It all ended in the same forlorn way—a temple, a palace, a triumphal pillar, with those who had reared them dust, and time by every stealthy means in its power seeking to raze and annul what their ruined hands had wrought. Could

the mind of man conceive anything forlorner than his own career since the tail of the ape dropped from his spine and its gibberings grew articulate language on his lips? He had for ever been in abject fear of death, and had for ever shaped from this fear new gods that he forsook for newer still. His very existence on the planet had been a contemptibly small part of its duration, and for millions of years hereafter this globe of dirt that goes whirling about the sun would not only cease to contain him, but would forget that he had ever moved among its continents and isles. Since his birth he had ceaselessly been crying out for light, and as ceaselessly had persecuted and destroyed almost every fellow-creature who had sought to bless him with its beams. He had wantonly wallowed in ignorance, and for his folly drunk to the dregs bitterest draughts of punishment. Yet no punishment had cured him of this folly. He had grovelled before his worst foes and crucified his best friends. Superstition had been his curse, yet to tell him that he was superstitious had meant to get from him in return the dungeon, the rack, the block, or the gibbet. Infinite numbers of times he had shown himself a bigot and a dotard, yet none the less had he crowned himself at last with the tinsel of a believed immortality, insisting that it was purest gold. The Christianity to which he now clung in professed reverence he had made ridiculous and blasphemous, hating out his hates, lying out his lies, as though in the creed that forbade them there had been no vestige of such veto. Why heed the welfare of so self-contradictory a dullard? He had but to use his reason and see that the ends of all happiness were here and now, that the crumbling records of Thebes and Benares, of Balbec and Persepolis, were merely mementoes of his dunce-like credulity. Whatever the mystic and mighty design of creation, he had but to recognise that he, an ephemeral biped, meant only an infinitesimal part of it—no more and no less than the falling of a leaf in a huge forest thousands of years ago. And yet, in his insensate egotism, poor mote dancing amid the sunshine of an hour, he presumed to flatter himself that he was an exiled deity, an angel with inchoate wings, an heir to

eternal elysium. He had simply to recollect that if the absurdity of his living for ever were indeed true, then he must have had ante-natal life, since the endless can have known no beginning. But he is incapable of recollecting any ante-natal life, and why, then, should he dream that death would not in the same way blot out all memory of the life through which he passes now? Hence, even taking him on his own preposterous ground, would not the grave bring to him virtual annihilation if nothing more absolute? Well, since he loved his idiotic delusions, let him go on through the ages playing with them like the silly toys they were, now building his fanes and now pulling them down, now swearing by one god and now by another. "Holding no form of creed but contemplating all," I, at least, I, Harold Mountstuart, who knew myself for the mean atom that I was, would suck what sensuous honey I could from this quick-withering flower of my brief earthly sojourn, and go down into my tomb careless both of the terrible pathos and the clownish stupidity that clung about the fate of my kind!

Damnable tenets you will call these, good reader, but my entire consciousness of their evil perhaps made them more damnable still. Endow a rattlesnake in its native thicket with the intelligence of a cultivated man, while yet allowing it to retain its full venomous desires, and you will reach some clear idea of my own odd mental state. That which came within my path I chose mortally to sting. I did not confine myself, as does the unreasoning rattlesnake, simply to the destruction of what materially hindered and opposed me; I used my fangs in securing a more commodious thicket than the one I already possessed, and in bettering, at whatever price, my general encompassment. I was a reptile of sordid ambitions, microscopic conscience, excessive shrewdness, and enormous skill in exploiting my capacities to slay. Moving amid my fellows, I gave no sign before I sprang upon my prey; without the faintest rustle of sound my folds uncoiled themselves. I was the essence of social danger, and perfectly understood that if many more such beings as myself were to breathe here on earth it would be a biding-place of desolation and dismay.

Once back in London, I yielded to the persuasions of friends and went out into the world. My success there was now more brilliant than it had ever been before, and because, I suppose, of my late journeyings. Not that I played, by any means, the part of the travelled rhapsodist. Nothing is drearier, as I had long ago discovered, than the person who incessantly thrusts at his friends verbal photographs of countries which he has visited and they have not. I made a point of never referring to my Eastern experiences except when asked to do so ; and then I touched upon them with so much commingled freshness and humour that my recitals grew flatteringly in popular demand. Meanwhile I abstained from all large gatherings, never permitting myself to be seen at theatres, and referring at discreet intervals to the state of mourning in which I still remained. Uncle Cecil had written me one or two rather sombre letters from Graydon Hall, in which he declared that his health was by no means good ; and once he made so distinct an allusion to his unabandoned habit of exorbitant smoking that I felt encouraged by the confirmed weakness this admission betrayed. For although I had granted him several months more of life, my purposed mode of ending his days had now taken clear lines of future accomplishment, and I had begun a series of trips down into my country-home of Dyandotte, for work there in my chemical laboratory. The study of poisons had always fascinated me, though I knew nothing concerning the deadly drug of nicotine, and desired that its preparation in the most toxic form should be an affair solely of my own agency, and should stay unshared either by the knowledge or surmise of any one on earth.

Adroitly, mournfully, and in quarters where I knew the tidings would tell the most, I mentioned the cause of my uncle's failing health. "In my own presence, just before I went to the East," I would affirm, "he fainted dead away, and afterward told me that continual smoking was the reason of it." Or again : "His physicians have begged and warned him in vain regarding tobacco, of which he consumes great quantities."

Or still again : "Poor Uncle Cecil is hardly ever without

a cigar between his lips, though the doctors frown upon and forbid its use."

Convinced that the grip of his passion was permanent, I wrote him an imploring letter, which he answered in a hopeless yet kindly strain. This letter of mine I composed at Dyandotte, and on the very day it was sealed and forwarded I had assured myself that my feat of brewing the poison would be as effectual as if performed by the trustiest expert.

Nicotine is a poison rarely found in the flagons of professional chemists. It is an oily and colourless fluid when pure, and is one of the volatile alkaloids, like hemlock, piturie, or sparteine. I found its manufacture somewhat troublesome, especially as I wished to guard against having too strong fumes from the tobacco whence I derived it escape among the servants of the household. Alcohol and ether, as I soon learned, will dissolve nicotine in every proportion, and on distilling such solutions we perceive that nicotine goes over first. With hydrochloric, nitric, and a few other similar acids, it does not readily crystallise, but with tartaric and oxalic acid it will join to form white crystalline salts, of which oxalate of nicotine is soluble in alcohol. From this salt, the best for such a purpose, I regenerated nicotine in a pure state. It pleased me to discover that the poison had very seldom been known as an employed means of murder. Accident explains nearly all the fatalities which have resulted from it. Criminal cases, however, have occurred. A famous one was that of the killing of M. Fougnies by Count Bocarmé and his wife. The Count made an actual study of chemistry in order to prepare the alkaloid with his own hands. He slew his victim, but in a most bungling style. Though death was almost immediate, he endeavoured to hide every trace of his crime by pouring strong acetic acid into the mouth and over the body of the corpse. Count Bocarmé was executed, I believe, for this very clumsy proceeding—one whose dunce-like awkwardness might better have doomed him to the most refined species of torture. There have also been a few suicides from nicotine, and here the archives of its injuries end. One fact, how-

ever, stimulated and pleased me. The best authorities in toxicology, when treating of nicotine, admitted that its presence in the body of a human being supposed to have died from its effects was excessively hard to find, *provided this person had been a confirmed smoker.*

All through the remainder of the winter, and well past the beginning of the spring, I refrained from going to Graydon Hall. My uncle also refrained from coming up to London, and finally wrote me in terms that for him had an almost affectionate ring. Why had I not paid him a visit, and would I not shortly forsake town distractions for this purpose, even if my stay were a very brief one? Then followed a dreary little confession of his own increased discomforts. A nervous dread had come upon him, a dread of which he was keenly ashamed, and yet one to which he dared not do otherwise than yield. He had been seized by it quite suddenly; he shivered with fright at the thought of entering a railway train. "Dr. Strangford is no longer here," he wrote, "and an older and much wiser man has taken his place. This Dr. Kneeland assures me that my curious fear of travel has before now drifted into his professional ken. He desires me to place myself unrestrictedly beneath his treatment, and I need not touch upon a certain stringent detail of his medical advice. In this respect, Harold, I feel that it is too late for me to mend. Mending might indeed mean death to me at my time of life and in my relatively enfeebled state. Already I am beset by fits of the severest depression, and those queer fainting-attacks, of which you witnessed one in your own chambers, are now far more frequent than ever before. Such a short time ago I had qualms of envy when I thought how proud was my brother's fortune and position compared with my own. Here I am, possessed of both, the reigning master of this magnificent heritage; and yet my shattered nerves and my failing vitality rob the mastership of every grateful thrill. Through these lofty rooms and corridors move the ghosts of my brother Malcolm, of ill-fated Egerton, of poor, worse-fated Blanche. In my dark moods I keep asking myself if my doom may not swiftly follow theirs. These are perhaps

but the cobwebs that fancy spins, yet I find them strangely stubborn ; the besom of reason is powerless to brush them away."

Brooding over those despondent lines, I saw in them the very chance that I desired. It was now nearly a year since Blanche had died. What use in waiting longer ? And yet I would willingly wait if nature gave evidence of soon becoming my abettor. Possibly she had already numbered my uncle's days, and if so I would very gladly join issue with her, and retire, as it were, in deference to her neater tactics.

It was high time, however, I concluded, that Graydon Hall should see something more of me. And a few days later I departed thither, carrying carefully on my person a small but well-filled flask, of whose contents no one living could possibly have been aware save myself.

CHAPTER XII.

Once more I looked at the lovely home of my ancestors when Spring had dowered with emerald largess its lawns and trees. But the weather was raw and rainy on my arrival, and so continued for a dreary week. I had expected to find Uncle Cecil in gloomier spirits because of the inclement skies, but here I was mistaken, for the relative brightness of his bearing really roused my wonder. "It charms me to find you so much better than I had expected after your grey-tinted accounts of yourself," I told him.

"Truly," he answered, "I believe it's your coming, Harold."

"That's delightful to hear."

"But you see," he pursued, "what a wreck I look."

"Not at all," I said, lying to him with my sweetest smile. For a wreck he certainly did look, and his dull eyes and sunken cheeks had told their instant story. He still persisted in smoking, though not with the excess of former times. My presence, as I soon noted, had truly wrought in him this flickering and feverish kind of change. But I had

scarcely been more than a day at the Hall than it grew plain to me that his rather droll regard for myself had effected only superficial results. Privately to talk with him was to observe in what inky dyes of sadness he had become steeped. I made my own manners brim with cheerfulness, though all the while I was narrowly watching him and striving to decide whether he had not fallen into one of those ruts of nervous hypochondria where many an invalid has stayed for two or even three decades without dying.

Angus still remained at Cleeve Lodge with his hateful playmates. But Edna and Miss Ramsdell were here at the Hall, neither in the least an enlivening associate. It struck me, after a while, that Edna had grown more disagreeable than ever. For hours I would not see her at all, and when she appeared at meals the rain and east winds outside seemed typified in her crabbed demeanour.

"You've worked such an improvement in papa," she said to me with one of her acid smiles, "that you really ought to take up your abode at Graydon. Perhaps he'll make a will, leaving everything to you, and cut off poor Angus and me with a shilling. Am I not right?" she added, appealing suddenly to Miss Ramsdell.

"Oh, Miss Edna!"

This was all that the meek-eyed companion ever said in reply to these or any other speeches of an equally sneering sort. She appeared cowed into utter submission, though now and then I thought her mild gaze met my own with a furtive rebellious gleam. Words of any kind were so rare on her lips that the very sound of her voice was unfamiliar to me. "If I could pity anybody," I said to myself, "it would be this bullied and sat-upon young woman, who clearly does not dare hold her head up lest this little scrawny, black-browed ogress will snap it off."

I bore in most smiling fashion with all Edna's acerbities. It was quite out of my line of action to squabble with her. A mosquito would have been a much more respectable assailant, since that could inflict a positive sting and was sometimes very hard to kill. My cousin, it was true, might be just as hard to kill (in the safe fashion I should aim for),

but her bite and her buzz were alike innocuous to either my nerves or flesh.

With all her faults, Edna was not a bad daughter. Uncle Cecil's declining health worried her, and she would often try to do him little services which he received with a bored air.

"Edna," he said to me one day, "is a thorn in my flesh. Already she has made herself immensely unpopular with several of the country families here in Derbyshire. She is now old enough to play the *châtelaine* with some sort of decent success; but she seems, instead, to do nothing except watch the chance of using her tongue as though it were a pair of nippers."

Not long after this, Edna's hostility to myself was augmented by a remark of her father's. He made it at dinner, and in a vein of careless irony. I had just aided him with some rather tangled accounts, and hence had given him marked relief. "You're an invaluable nephew," he said, with unwonted levity. "It's a pity you're not my next of kin, for you've a head on your shoulders worth any Mountstuart's I know. It would be an excellent idea to make you my heir, just for the general safety of the estate, if no other reason."

Edna gave a sharp, high laugh. "Do so, by all means, papa!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure Harold would be pierced with gratitude." And then she repeated her laugh, casting a look at Miss Ramsdell, who lowered her blond brows with irresponsive demureness. I chose not to reply then, but with a gentle air of indifference addressed my uncle on some subject totally new. Later I seized the chance, however, of meeting Edna alone.

"You took your father's joke very seriously," I said to her. As she started and scowled a little, I went on: "Perhaps there's no need of my explaining what joke I mean."

"Oh, no." She measured me for a moment with her small, black, saucy eyes. "Jokes on certain topics are better restrained."

"Really," I laughed, with adamantine good nature, "that

is an affair for your father's consideration, not mine. But pray disabuse yourself of any idea that I wish to usurp the rights of either Angus or his two sisters."

Again she measured me with her impudent look. "You're very popular, I suppose," she muttered. "I've heard that you are."

"It's true," I again laughed, "that I don't try to make people dislike me. That is a very unwise policy, my dear Edna, as you may realise when you're a little older."

"Policy," she sneered. "Yes, that is what you 'general favourites,' as you are called, are always thinking about. Well, I don't care a bit about people who are for ever afraid of being impolitic; they always affect me queerly—as if they were hypocrites or time-servers."

With this bit of caustic impertinence she moved quickly away. I had an impulse to follow her and crush her beneath a tirade of reprimand that she would not for many a day have forgotten. But a few reflective moments inhibited this course. A twinge of real alarm prevailed with me as well. Could she perchance have grown suspicious of what I truly was, drawing intuitive deductions from my recent past, and shrinking, because of these, from the possible fresh misdeeds of my future? Tales of such clairvoyance were extant, however grossly incredible. I passed an hour or two of brooding discomfort in my own apartments. The rain had been incessant all the morning, but at length, as I glanced forth from my window upon the trim green terraces below, I saw that the vernal deluge no longer soaked them, and that a tall, slender figure, which I promptly recognised as Miss Ramsdell's, was moving along one of the broad, damp pathways.

At once I made up my mind, and in a few minutes I had joined her. She seemed amazed when I commenced to stroll at her side, but still more amazed when I plunged, with calm resolve, into the question of which I was bent on speaking.

"Tell me, pray tell me, my dear Miss Ramsdell, why it is that Edna so heartily hates me."

"Hates you, Mr. Mountstuart?" The delicate, nun-like

face was lifted to mine with a sudden hardness on every feature. Tints of faint rose wavered across the pallor of Miss Ramsdell's pure-cut cheeks, and in her soft eyes I saw swim two specks of light, keen yet scarcely larger than a pin-head. She did not quicken her pace or abate it as I walked at her side, but I fancied that her placid steps had grown somewhat uneven.

"Yes," I persisted. "What have I done to *cause* this hate in her?"

Here the young woman gave several quick negative shakes of her small head, on its fragile white stem of throat. "She doesn't hate you at all. She likes you very much."

"Likes me very much? Good heavens, Miss Ramsdell! Do you know what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Mountstuart. She admires you in every way, and is proud of having you for her kinsman."

"In mercy's name, then," I smiled, "why does she treat me with such horrible rudeness?"

Miss Ramsdell glanced up at the rows of windows which gleamed from the spacious house-front above us. Then she showed me a visage so utterly altered from her usual one that I almost recoiled in consternation. Even Edna's had never looked more scornfully bitter. And when she spoke, the sweet English music of her voice had become a husky discord.

"She's jealous of you. It's nothing but that. She isn't like her brother, Angus; he's merely a cynic and a misanthrope. But Edna Mountstuart is a good deal more. Her spirit is packed with envy and spite. It's the most extraordinary spirit ever created. She can't endure to see any one happy. It's her nature to inflict wounds on every one with whom she comes into contact."

"Really?"

"Yes; she abhors Angus, just as she abhorred her lovely sister, Olive, whom she literally drove across the ocean. The idea of having Angus inherit this estate sickens her with aversion. She believes her father to be very ill, and so she treats him with a kind of frightened tenderness. I repeat,

she is jealous of you, and because her father has regard for you. If it were not for that, I believe you would be an exception among her multitudes of detestations. But perhaps even there I judge her too leniently."

We turned, as if by mutual accord, as we reached the end of the long terrace, set with its bloom-laden marble urns and carpeted with its fragrant, plush-like turf, where the rain-drops glittered in prodigal brilliance below a brightening heaven.

"You certainly haven't handled her, thus far," I said, "with gloves of a remarkably soft texture."

"Oh, I've used no gloves at all; I admit it."

The lady's glance went to the windows again, many of which had begun to take upon their panes a vivid diamond sparkle. "She may be looking down at us this minute from somewhere yonder. If so, if she sees us talking together, she'll harass and torment me to find out what we were saying. Then, if I tell her it was only the weather, she'll insult me because I spoke to you at all. Oh, sir, you don't know what I endure from that girl. You can't have the least conception of what I endure!"

"Then why endure it?"

Miss Ramsdell paused, and I naturally paused as well. We stood facing one another. She wore an expression now of mingled fierceness and sorrow.

"I *oughtn't* to stay. I—I've no right to stay, feeling as I do."

"How *is* it that you feel? Tell me."

"As—*as if I could kill*," she gasped, with a slight catching of the breath, like a choked sob. "You don't know what it is to feel that way—of course not. She'd be furious if I went—there's no doubt of that. She considers me made for the special purpose of trampling on and hurting. But I should leave her if—if——"

"If it were not that you hold her in such abhorrence?" I supplied, giving to my mien an assumed sympathy which I strove to colour with decorous astonishment. "That, surely, is the queerest of all motives."

She nodded with emphasis. "But that *is* my motive in staying. I owe her a debt."

"Of gratitude?"

"No; vengeance!"

"Ah, I see. And it is a debt that you mean to pay?"

"I don't know—I don't know."

A wildness overspread her face, and the drawn lines at each corner of her mouth showed abrupt fear. She drew backward several paces, staring at me with dread and distrust.

"I—I should not have said what I have said!" she faltered. "I—I'm naturally a timid woman enough. Perhaps you'll tell everything to Mr. Mountstuart or to —*her*."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," I said. "I'm no bearer of tales, Miss Ramsdell. You need not feel the least alarm on my account. And now, pray pardon me, but I can't help feeling that you have received some very harsh injury from Edna—one which pains you yet, and will perchance pain you always."

Confident, from the flurried way in which she bit her lips and creased her forehead, that I had either guessed the exact truth or something closely like it, I was on the point of adding a direct question to the words just pronounced. But in another instant she raised an imploring hand half way, and following the turn of her eyes I saw that Edna was approaching us from the house.

I lifted my hat, as if politely taking leave of Miss Ramsdell. "Some other time, then," I said, nodding gaily, as if my language dealt in the most flimsy commonplace, "you will tell me everything—I am sure you will, and I promise you that I will not only listen with great attention, but aid you as far as can lie within my power."

That last sentence, which was intentionally made ambiguous, caused in my hearer a perceptible start. At once I retreated after I had spoken it, swinging my umbrella with jaunty nonchalance.

During the next hour it clouded over again, and before dinner I spent quite a while with Uncle Cecil. I found him petulant about the recurrence of gloomy skies. He spoke with the peevishness of a child on this subject, and declared

that the promise of sunshine, succeeded by its deprivation, had cost him severe annoyance. More than ever I grew certain that his condition held no threat to his life, and that this intermittence of melancholia and irritation might indefinitely continue. Of late he had begun to smoke more than when I first came, his good resolutions having faded after a few days of semi-abstinence. It was during our present chat together that I finally made up my mind. At the first good chance I would give him the poison which was now always carried on my person. The chance must be waited for with extreme care, and when it came I would grasp it and unflinchingly act. In spite of all my cautious reading and study regarding the properties and effects of nicotine, I still felt a longing to invest my bold use of it with one last secure screen. This was the day for Dr. Kneeland, the new practitioner, to call, and in due time he came. He was a big, ruddy man, with urbane manners. One could easily fancy that he might have drifted down here from Harley Street; he had the London accent and the London air. But after listening to him and watching him for a little while, I felt myself doubting the scope and depth of his science. Not that he seemed precisely superficial; you could better have defined him by saying that he had too evident a fear of appearing so.

Uncle Cecil talked with him in a pathetic, juvenile strain. The master of Graydon was fast losing every vestige of his old supercilious foibles. I slipped from the room quite a while before the interview ended, and managed politely to button-hole Dr. Kneeland in the lower hall.

I asked with great solicitude about the invalid's real odds in the way of recovery. Dr. Kneeland, who was too civil to be blunt if he tried, shrugged his massive shoulders and delivered himself of a very candid sentence.

"Mr. Mountstuart, even at his advanced age, might be a well man in a year if he would fling tobacco to the dogs."

I gave a satiric sigh. "Alas! doctor, the dogs wouldn't touch it if he did. It's only we lords of creation who make ourselves its slaves."

"True, true," chuckled my hearer, as if I had said a

remarkably good thing. Then, looking serious, he continued: "But few men are so thoroughly its slave as your uncle."

"Tell me," I returned, with my trick of showing profound earnestness and anxiety. "Is his life in danger if he refuses to abandon the habit?"

"Decidedly, yes. His system is positively drenched in nicotine."

"Nicotine?"

"Yes—why not?"

"But nicotine is a deadly poison."

"Of course. In these past years he has slowly received enough to kill a herd of oxen. I have slight doubt that his lungs and the upper portion of his heart are blackened with it. He inhales the smoke; it's a most distressing case. Those attacks of faintness are the beginning of cerebral paralysis."

"Really?"

"Beyond a doubt. If you could persuade him to give up the weed entirely, I could treat him, I think, with thorough success. At first his sufferings would be keen, but nothing compared with those of the man who abandons the opium-habit. Still, they might even result in delirium. But I should have no fear. Now, as matters stand, to try and help him is to put salve on a wound from which the patient constantly tears the bandage the moment your back is turned on him."

"Good," I thought, when Dr. Kneeland had left me, going out through the leaden and rainy spring twilight to where his gig waited him. "Here is just the man to laugh at an autopsy if it were proposed, and to take for granted all its disclosures if it were performed. I need simply wait my hour now, and act when it arrives."

CHAPTER XIII.

EDNA appeared at dinner, that evening, unaccompanied by Miss Ramsdell. Uncle Cecil was in a brighter and more

garrulous mood than usual, no doubt because of certain cheering though deceptive words from his well-paid physician. For this reason he may have chosen to notice the particularly sour look on Edna's face, and at length to inquire why Miss Ramsdell was absent.

Edna, as she answered, fixed her chill gaze upon me. "I had occasion to tell her," was the reply, "that it looked vulgar and immodest to waylay gentlemen on the lawn and try to walk with them. She became enraged, and insists that my cruelty has destroyed her appetite."

"No doubt it did," I said. "She was foolish in minding the accusation, however, as it was perfectly false."

Edna bristled, and snapped her black eyes at me.

Her father broke in before she could speak. "Edna, you treat that poor creature abominably," he said. "I know I'm telling you so for the thousandth time, and it's all the more to your shame that I am. There is something astounding in her willingness to endure your insults and persecutions. One of these days, when she has turned her back on you for good and all, you will regret that you ever held her at so cheap a value."

Edna lowered her head, gnawing her under lip and growing duskily pale. She did not speak another word through dinner, and I told myself that she was now more rabidly jealous of me than ever. It was about nine o'clock this same evening when I came unexpectedly upon Miss Ramsdell as she was getting a book from one of the upper bookshelves of the library. Her arm was raised, but she let it drop as if a missile had wounded it, after seeing across one shoulder that I had entered the room.

I went straight up to her and spoke with intimate ease. "I am more than sorry she has been showing her cloven foot again."

"Again? Does she ever hide it?"

"I trust you dined somewhere, in spite of her taunts and slurs."

"No—she has driven away the least sign of appetite. I only hope it will not be the same with my sleep. I came here for something to read in case insomnia grasps me. Do

you know Bulwer's novels?" And she lifted a volume which lay, as if already selected by her, on the lowest ledge.

I took the book from her hand. "Nearly everything by this author I read when a boy," came my answer. "His romances interested me then. I imagine they would now strike me as very unreal and—Ah," I broke off, "this is 'Lucretia.' I recollect it quite well." Then I hesitated for a moment and looked her coolly and firmly in the eyes. "It's the story of a poisoner—a kind of Brinvilliers, who amuses herself by secretly dosing several people to death."

"Yes?" she said, with a faint start. "And was she discovered in the end?"

"Really, I forget. It's my impression, however, that she was."

"Of course—yes—I suppose so. People like that usually are; is it not true?"

"Not always."

"Not always? Really? I—thought otherwise." She spoke with a sort of excited accent, yet with all the natural melody of her refined voice. She stretched forth a hand and I gave her back the book, which she opened, glancing here and there at a quick-turned page. "I'll take this with me, then," she recommenced. "I'll read it if I'm wakeful. It may put me to sleep."

"Be careful. It may make you still more wakeful. And so the relentless little Edna has distressed you this time so keenly? But you could go elsewhere; you could obtain another situation."

"Oh, yes." She had closed the book now, though she still retained it. "But it isn't that.

"What is it, then?" I asked, with a certain persuasive softness which I knew to have its magnetic qualities. "Are you truly lingering here at Graydon for no other reason than that you detest Edna? It's a feeling that I can understand——"

"You can understand it?" she shot in with queer speed, flushing a little and devouring my face for a second or two with the kindled gentleness of her eyes.

"I can understand all kinds of contradictory emotions in the human heart. Come, now ; Edna has not merely scratched you with her mischievous little claws. She has inflicted a deeper wound. Tell me what it is."

She stared at me oddly. "You seem to know," she murmured. "You are very clever, and you seem to have guessed."

"I think I have guessed. The kind of wound could only have been one, to make you loathe her so."

"I do loathe her—I do ! "

A big chair stood just behind Miss Ramsdell, and she now felt backward for it, as though to make sure it was yet there, while still facing me. Then she sank into the chair, her look flaming faintly and wistfully up into mine and one of her arms hugging against her bosom the book which I had just told her was about murdering by poison.

"Do you remember Mr. Towse ? " she proceeded, after a pause, during which I saw the white slope between her slim throat and fragile chin stirred by pathetic throbs. "He was the tutor of Angus when you were at Cleeve Lodge."

"Yes ; I remember him perfectly."

"Well, you possibly thought him insignificant, colourless, a person to be looked at once and then ignored."

"Perhaps you will let me confess to you——" I began.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter if you *did* think contemptuously of him. Nothing could be more natural. I did myself—at first."

"At first ? "

"Afterward, knowing him better, I saw in him qualities both of mind and heart that surprised me, pleased me, and finally made me love him. It may have been that I had not dreamed of loving him till I lit one day on the discovery that he cared very much for me. However that was, he became my betrothed lover, and as dear to me, I imagine, as though he were the grandest, handsomest, most presentable of men. We women are so strange ; we can love with devotion, with passion, a man whose failings, physical or mental, we concede to ourselves and even ridicule in secret. We have drunk of our fairy elixir, and we know it has

worked in us a mere deceptive intoxication. But we cherish our delusion just the same; it often lasts us a lifetime. Mine would have lasted that long with me. I would not have given poor, mild-mannered, shrinking John Towse for the princeliest and grandest of suitors. Meanwhile, I had grown to feel a certain pity for Edna, not unmixed with actual regard. It was not so difficult to bear with her whims and oddities. I felt sorry for her because God had made her so malicious and envious. I used to have dreams that I could change her whole nature, not half so much through words as through the silent and steadfast influence of moral example. I suppose I was wholly good in those days. If I am bad now—bad and embittered to the very core of my soul—it is because she has wrought this change."

"Edna had power to do so?"

"What can the virus of a reptile do to human blood? It had entered into her silly but wicked spirit that I was hers, that I belonged to her, as the slave to his master. While I never even fancied that she would take measures more material than to fume and fret over my engagement, she was poisoning him against me with lies about my past life. Seven years before, while teaching school in Surrey, I had imagined that I was desperately in love with a man whose evil character I did not know, but from whom I was saved in time by the intervention of a friend. It was all a mere romantic self-deception on my part (I had barely reached my twentieth year), and when I woke to the fact of how deceived I had been by an accomplished hypocrite the blow was purely one from which pride suffered. But with deplorable folly I had kept several letters written me by this most unworthy of men—why *do* we ever retain letters which it brings us only painful memories to peruse? In a fit of fatuous confidence one evening I told Edna of the whole forlorn affair, and went so rashly far as to read her a few eloquent paragraphs from these preserved masterpieces of guile. To have done this was to commit the insanest error. Edna now played the traitress as never before, it were safe to say, in her short malevolent life. She did not

scruple to steal two of these letters from my bureau drawer, and to place them in John Towse's hands, accompanying this craven act with cowardly slanders. He believed it all, and, as luckless chance directed, had received, just at this time, an offer from a former acquaintance to go with him to Australia as tutor of his two young sons. Edna had meanwhile tormented her brother Angus on the subject of getting rid of Mr. Towse. She declared him to be a person wholly unfit for his place, and one whose awkward and bashful manners made him socially absurd before strangers. Well"—and here Miss Ramsdell, with misted eyes, gave me the visible effect of one who determinedly keeps back a torrent of tears—"John Towse left Cleeve Lodge quite suddenly one day, and both Angus and his father believed that nothing except Edna's frivolous dislike had driven him to accept the Australian offer. But something else had driven him—his weak and unmanly distrust of me. Just before he left we met—here in this very library where you and I meet now—though the interview was a very brief one. He told me that Edna had shown him those letters; he told me of things that she had repeated to him as having been long ago 'confessed' to her by myself. I grew faint and dizzy when I learned of her deadly falsehoods; for those, after all, were so much more dastardly than even her shameful theft of my papers. 'And do you believe I am what her false tongue declares me?' I asked. He turned very pale, and stammered a vague answer. If I had not loved him I might have been less proud then. But, as it was, I merely stood with clenched hands and stared at him, waiting for him to speak. He did not speak, and I would not. It seemed to me as if there were not power enough in the whole world to drag a single syllable from me until he broke that torturing silence. But he failed to break it; all that he did was to watch me with an expression of reproach that made every nerve in my body tingle in wrath. Suddenly I turned from him and quitted the room. I have never seen him since that hour."

Her eyes were quite dry now, though they shone up at me with a wild scintillance, like some snared bird's. Her

hands worked together nervously in her lap above the book which lay there ; otherwise she bore herself with composure. Mutely, as I could guess, she was asking me for a judgment of Edna's conduct, so that my outspoken abhorrence might in its way justify the hate which she had already affirmed.

"Your lot has been a bitter one," I said. "You make me ashamed to think of Edna as my cousin. But her treachery. Has she admitted it ?"

"Unblushingly. Indeed, she often twits me with having been checkmated by it. 'I've grown accustomed to you,' she will often say, 'and I propose to keep you here for some time yet, though now and then you bore me dreadfully.'"

"And you reply to this—— ?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing ?"

"Nothing." She ceased making the restless motion of her hands, and the fire seemed to die from her gaze, leaving it dull and sullen. "Some women would have struck her on the lying mouth and then quitted her father's house for ever. There could be no fairer answer than that. What would mere rebuking words be worth ? She believes that she holds over me a kind of fascination—that I am afraid of her—that I dare not desert her. Perhaps I have fostered this feeling of late. If so, I have had my reasons."

"And these were—— ?"

"Oh, I don't know—I can't tell you !" she exclaimed, suddenly rising and again hugging the book to her breast. "It all comes to this : I detest her as if she were a real viper and not one clad in human flesh. And yet I stay here—I stay here, as you see !"

She moved past me. Her face, viewed over one of her shoulders while she kept gliding toward the door of the library, haunted me for a good while after she had gone. I sank into the chair from which she had risen, and thought over all that she had said and just how she had said it.

"There is murder in that woman's heart," I concluded, "and yet she is not of the stuff that makes an assassin. She remains with Edna because a hungry homicidal hate keeps

her at the girl's elbow. She would kill her if she dared. She is not like me in her desire to kill; she is mad from a sense of injustice. Her case is curiously interesting. By nature she is the gentlest of beings, but the sharpness of her sorrow has cut into the brain and wrought a lesion there. What she requires is courage, and even her dementia cannot give her that. How if she were convinced that she could deal her blow *with entire personal safety?*"

But musings like these, I soon told myself, were not pertinent to the present period of my life. In a short time—to-morrow or next day, it might be—I must test the potency of a certain liquid whose vial now lay next my heart. Let Edna do her worst; she could wreak her spite on feeble objects; I need not stay my hand because of it. She could no more retard me than if she were a gnat singing in the sunshine.

All the next day Uncle Cecil showed signs of improved health. The weather cleared delightfully a little while after breakfast, and we spent nearly an hour together strolling about the beautiful grounds of Graydon. He still kept up his smoking with scarcely the intermission of five minutes at a time. He assured me that these were a new brand of cigars just sent him from London, and so mild that a "baby in arms" might hardly be hurt by them. At his request I tried one, and soon said laughingly that the baby in arms who survived a few puffs must be an infant Hercules and nothing feebler. Through the rest of that day Edna, who had not even been visible at breakfast, kept herself in strict retirement. I concluded that she was sulking somewhere out of sight, and dismissed her from my thoughts. Miss Ramsdell also had remained in seclusion up to luncheon-time. She appeared at that meal, however, and after my uncle had gone upstairs she joined me while I was absently turning over a large bookful of old prints in one of the drawing-rooms, not seeing a single feature of them and feeling those excited thrills, by no means unpleasurable, which preluded the new daring act I expected soon to perform.

"Mr. Mountstuart."

She had entered the chamber so softly that this sound of my own name was the first knowledge I had of her presence there. As I started and turned, she hurried up to my side. Again she had somehow grown the meek and dove-eyed creature I had yesterday seen her.

"I was very blamable," she softly panted, "to speak to you as I did. You must overlook it—you must think no more of it. Promise me that you will!"

"You're afraid, then, that I shall betray your confidences, Miss Ramsdell?"

"Oh, no—not that! I do trust you! I believe you one of the best of men. I—I haven't any *such* fear—indeed, no! But to have told you why I stayed here! In the first place, my words were but partly true. In the second place it was horrible taste for me to utter them."

"You mean that you really are fond of Edna, after all?"

"Ah," she said, "your sarcasm is crushing! But I deserve it. You must think me the most unprincipled creature; I'm sure you do! I——"

But just then, as I began to see in this new penitential mood the prospect of considerable boredom, a servant entered with the merciful message that my uncle wished to have me come to him immediately. I at once quitted Miss Ramsdell (saying, "Oh, it's all forgotten between us; don't let it trouble you in the faintest degree"), and went upstairs to find Uncle Cecil stretched on his bed, with loosened shirt-front and a strained, affrighted look.

"I've another attack of that devilish palpitation," he said, huskily. "My heart is going like a sledge-hammer."

"Oh, it's nothing but indigestion," I replied, seating myself at his bedside and taking one of his wrists between my fingers. "Your pulse isn't so quick, either, as you fancy it. You ate rather heartily at luncheon. It will soon pass away."

"Or I shall pass away with it," he replied, in a grim mutter.

A certain idea shot like lightning through my brain. "Nonsense," I smiled. "Can I get you anything? Does the doctor forbid stimulants?"

"Not if I feel like this. There's a flask of brandy on my dressing-table. A glass is beside it. Pour me out——"

He did not end the sentence. His eyes closed, and the colour sunk out of his cheeks. I steadily watched him for a few seconds. It was one of his strange attacks, past a doubt. Now was my time.

"I slipped toward the dressing-table. The flask and glass were both there. I poured out a moderate potion. Then I paused, glancing at the hall-door. It was closed. But at the farther end of the room was another door, opening just below the foot of the bed. I glanced at this door also. It was ajar, and beyond its aperture I caught a glimpse of the familiar sitting-room.

My back was not wholly turned to this second entrance. But I felt certain there could be no watcher in that other silent apartment. With speed and dexterity I drew forth my vial of nicotine, added half of it to the brandy, and replaced it in my breast-pocket. Then, carrying the poisoned glass to Uncle Cecil's bedside, I perceived that he was awakening from his stupor. The present seizure was of longer duration than the one from which he had suffered in my London chambers. Still, it had not proved by any means long. I was disappointed that this should be the case, for I had hoped to administer my drug while he was in an unconscious state, forcing him to swallow it by holding his head in a horizontal posture after spilling the contents of the glass into his mouth.

To my discomfiture, however, he had partially raised himself in bed as I approached him.

"Is it the brandy?" he queried, in very hoarse tones, while stretching forth one hand.

"Yes," I said.

He took the glass, drawing it to his lips with a steadier movement of wrist and fingers than I had presumed to expect. While in act of drinking he stopped short and looked at me.

"It has a queer smell," he said.

"It's only the brandy from the flask," I answered. "Drink it at once; it will do you good."

"There's no water in it?" he answered.

"None. Drink it this way. I'll get you water in a minute."

"But there *should* be water," he said peevishly.

"I'll get you some at once. Drink it raw, though. That is better for you, I'm sure."

"No—no—I——"

But here I forced him to drink. He was very weak, and my effort did not cost me much strength. Besides, he made slight opposition; he seemed willing to obey me, though loth to imbibe the liquid. When all of it had passed his lips I caught the glass away from him and hurried to a stand, where I had seen a large ewer. As I did so I heard him cough stranglingly. The ewer was full of water and I filled the glass rapidly. Then, as I rehastened toward his bed, I saw that Edna had entered from the sitting-room.

"Blunder of blunders!" I thought. "What foolhardiness made me leave that door unclosed?"

Edna was looking at me with an odd violence of scrutiny. But I paid no heed to her, and I am certain that I did not change colour or show a glimpse of uneasy surprise.

He took the water-filled glass from my hand and drained it. "Ah! that relieves me," he said, and dropped back upon the pillow, closing his eyes.

I stood watching him for a slight while with the most innocent air. Then I turned and pretended for the first time really to have perceived Edna.

The odd gaze had gone from her eyes. She drew close to her father's side. "Is papa ill?" she asked me, in her usual blunt way.

"He has been. It was one of his attacks, you know."

"But he does not lie down when he has them."

"This one came with a severe palpitation of the heart. He sent for me a few minutes ago, when he felt it approaching."

"Oh! he sent for you?" Knowing her as I now did, I could comprehend the jealousy which loaded this little sentence. But was jealousy all that it betrayed? I cursed my own recklessness as I put this question to my thoughts.

"Papa," Edna now said, leaning over her father, who lay with closed eyes and peaceful breathing—"papa, are you better?"

"Yes, I think so," he murmured, without lifting his eyelids. "The brandy Harold gave me has helped me—for the time at least."

Edna's gaze again swept my face. "You gave him brandy, then?" she asked.

"Yes. He requested it."

"Oh, he did."

"Assuredly. Ask him, if you think he did not."

She bridled, scowling a little. "Did I say that he did not?"

"No; but you seemed to doubt." I spoke with placid dignity, though every instant I anticipated the working of the poison, knowing well how rapid must be its results.

"Doubt," she repeated, and laughed once, quite low, with a peculiar harshness. I had reason to remember that laugh. It was the overture of later discords destined to assail me.

Again she leaned over her father. "Dear papa!" she exclaimed, with what struck me as an ostentation of solicitude, "I am so very sorry——" But further language died on her lips. Veering round toward myself she pointed at the prostrate form.

Just what I expected now began to occur. Excessive trembling of the limbs had beset Uncle Cecil, and his respiration became stertorous and very quickened. As he unclosed his eyes one swiftly saw the dilation of their pupils. He moaned as if in pain, and rose to a sitting posture in the bed.

"Good God!" he cried. "What's this? I'm dying!"

"No, no, no!" I exclaimed, catching both his hands, which were icily cold to my touch. I knew that the first tetanic convulsion must be near, and with great suddenness it arrived. He hurled his body backward on the bed, and uttered a wild cry as he did so. Edna echoed the cry and sped from the room. I felt certain that she had gone to call aid. My uncle grew quite rigid, and repeatedly it seemed as if his body only touched the mattress with the soles of his feet and the back of his

head. The convulsions became frightful. I was confident that they would not last longer than five minutes at the furthest. He had ceased to be conscious; the blankness of his rolling eyeballs revealed this. His form soon twisted and writhed, however, as though every drop of blood in his veins had turned to quicksilver, and his tongue, grown livid, lolled from his mouth. This, I was certain, meant the final fight with death. Suddenly Edna burst into the room again, followed by two or three servants with frightened faces. Then more servants hurried in. By this time the end was very near. His limbs had ceased from their repulsive contortions, and he lay quiescent, with only heavy and spasmodic motions of the breast.

"He is dying!" cried Edna; and she grasped my arm, peering fiercely into my face.

I made no answer, at first. But in a little while I lifted my head, and looked at her full in the feverish eyes. "He is dead," I replied.

She gave a loud, wailing shriek and reeled backward. One of the servants caught her. Others pressed nearer to the bed, while I receded from it. All was over. And yet there had been something in that last intense stare of Edna's which made me doubtful if all *were* really over. What had she guessed? *What had she seen?*

Would a trifling misstep, a careless oversight, plunge me into just that slough of suspicion which I had hitherto so sedulously sought to avoid? Having accomplished thus much, was I destined to be baulked and baffled in the perfecting of my splendid septuple design? The air that I breathed seemed now instinct with peril. And yet I could but vaguely explain wherefore.

CHAPTER XIV.

Dr. Kneeland arrived at my urgent summons, about a half-hour after Uncle Cecil's death. Then, after another half-hour, we were closeted together in the library downstairs. "You are not surprised, doctor?" I at length asked, in reply to certain words which had just left him.

"Surprised? Oh, of course. But this result might have been easily prophesied."

"You believe his death due——?" And here I purposely paused.

"To tobacco poisoning—oh, beyond all shadow of doubt. He had not the stamina which resist tobacco. Even such enormous excesses as his would not have hurt some men. But those whom they would neither hurt nor kill are immensely of the minority."

"In your certificate of his death, doctor," I pursued, "shall you mention this vice as the cause of it?"

My companion shrugged his massive shoulders and toyed with the eyeglass that dangled below his shirt-front.

"I shall call it paralysis of the brain," he replied, with musing slowness. "Why not, Mr. Mountstuart?—why not? The actual cause of death was surely a cerebral one. To specialise would be needlessly exact. If a man dies from heart-disease after an indiscreet amount of eating we are not required to assert that gluttony is the cause of his decease."

"I understand you perfectly, doctor." came my hearty response. "It is infinitely better that you *should* adopt the mode of action you have named. I——"

But then one of the closed doors was abruptly opened, and Edna entered the library. Somehow, the instant that I looked at her pale, set face, I divined the savage purpose—or at least a part of it—with which she had come. Still, I greeted her with a smile just sombre enough to be in the circumstances permissible.

"Why, Edna," I said, "are you well enough to be about like this? I am more than glad, considering that you were so ill a little while ago."

"I am ill yet; but one can make one's self do things when one feels it a duty."

She answered my words, but she kept her eyes fixed on Dr. Kneeland while speaking. He offered her a chair, but she ignored his courtesy, and, with continued avoidance of me, went on:

"I came here to tell you something, Dr. Kneeland, which

I feel that I ought to tell. This gentleman here, my cousin, Mr. Harold Mountstuart" (she now waved one hand in my direction, but did not deign to give me a glance), "was alone with my father in his dying moments." Here followed a silence. I felt a chill sweep through me, and then steadied my nerves by so strong an effort that I knew they would be proof against any possible further assault.

"Certainly I was alone with your father, just as you state, Edna," here came my retort, ringingly distinct. "Pray why do you only address the doctor and not notice me? Have I done anything to annoy or offend you?"

This was bold, but I felt that the occasion demanded boldness or nothing.

Edna now turned her face in my direction. "I came here to tell the doctor," she said, with sudden emphasis on every word, "that I am doubtful if my father died a natural death."

My nerves felt like steel now. I went close up to my cousin—so close that my breath almost touched her cheek—as I said to her: "Only yesterday your father told me that he thought you a mischievous little devil, and that he sometimes was ashamed to call you his daughter. If I was alone with him during his mortal attack, and if you think, or pretend to think, that he did not die a natural death, what then, pray, is your inference, real or pretended?"

This was indeed carrying the war into the enemy's camp. Edna dealt me one of her scowls, and then, with gruff defiance, answered:

"*I saw you pour something into the glass of brandy you gave him.*"

I lowered my head and lifted one hand to it, fluttering my eyelids and letting my underlip fall, like one in a very ecstasy of amazement. Then, with an indignant start, I threw back my head, making my whole visage flash disdain.

"This is the vilest of lies," I protested, yet with tones quite at their accustomed key. "Dr. Kneeland," I hurried on, "the accusation made by this evil-minded and false-

tongued girl can be met only in one way. I scorn to address another word to her. She is loathed by nearly everybody who comes in contact with her. The very servants here at Graydon detest her. I can afford to be called a poisoner—yes, surely I can so afford—by one whose own father could scarcely endure her presence, and whose name, even at her early age, has become the very synonym of slander and malice!"

It was plain to me that I frightened Edna. But I had not subdued her. By this time she had shrunk away from me till several yards divided us. But with dogged firmness her voice now braved me: "I saw you pour something into that glass. I did not see *what* you poured, or the bottle from which you poured it. But the motion of your right arm, and a partial glimpse of your hand, made me certain. I haven't called you a poisoner. You've used that word, not I. You can't browbeat me into silence. What I saw I saw."

Here Dr. Kneeland (whose face had already told me that he utterly doubted Edna) came swiftly to my side. "This must cease at once," he urged. "It is too ill-timed. Moreover, it is ridiculous."

"I agree with you, doctor," I returned, with a haughty glance at Edna. "It certainly *is* ridiculous. And yet there's an element in it of tragedy as well. To be accused——"

"But, my dear fellow," broke in Dr. Kneeland, with would-be propitiating blandness, "Miss Mountstuart has not accused any one of anything. She has simply dealt in—er—in a few imprudent phrases. What she says she saw I have no doubt that she merely imagined she saw. But you must consider the agitation from which she suffers. You must make allowances for her shocked and shattered state."

"Oh, if she were crazy, that, doctor, would be a different affair. But there is no evidence that she is not completely sane. There is great evidence, though, of her desire to harm me with her spite and spleen. But, as I have said, she shall be answered only in one way. I am forced, now,

to insist upon an autopsy of my uncle's body. I shall indeed oppose his burial until her vile charge has been scientifically refuted. If she makes it here she will make it to others. No man of pure and honourable life would for an instant permit it to remain unchallenged. There is something more than mournful in the thought of how one of God's meanest creatures may wantonly cast a stain upon the purest life!"

Thus speaking, I at once passed from the room. I saw the doctor turn a look of angry repulsion toward Edna, and felt sure that his sympathies were all on my own side.

How long, however, would they continue so? For the next two or three hours I was strongly agitated, but at the same time very cool-brained in a reflective and self-preservative sense. I had made my stupid blunder, and now I must fight the consequences of it. And I meant to fight them with unflinching zeal. An autopsy might be perilous, and yet there was hardly one chance in a hundred that it would prove so. Some physician of great acuteness might decide that more nicotine existed in the corpse than was possible even with so confirmed a smoker as my uncle. But this decision, after all, need not alarm me. Its potency would not prove incriminatingly co-operant with Edna's avowal. Even in that case, all I might fear was a kind of lurking, skulking suspicion against me. And such a suspicion would be intolerable. If anything transpired I wanted it to be my own resolute insistence on the holding of a close *post-mortem* scrutiny.

By evening Angus had presented himself at the Hall. His father's sudden death had produced the effect of curbing his native cynicism, but there were no marks of grief in his deportment, and it struck me, as I watched him, that paramount above all other emotion in his ugly little personality was regret at being forced from his seclusion at Cleeve Lodge and the congenial society there of his cherished snakes.

When he asked me about the arrangements for the funeral, I replied by asking him in return whether he had seen his sister and talked with her. Between a shrug and a sneer he told me that he had done both.

"And has she made to you," I boldly inquired, "certain insolent statements regarding myself?"

"She's always making insolent statements regarding everybody," he answered. "I think I know what you mean, Harold. If I were you I would not give her nonsensical babble a further thought. Dr. Kneeland says the same thing. We've agreed that she ought to be put into a straight-jacket."

But this did not suit me. I had taken the bull by both horns, and my grasp was not to be relinquished. Edna's barb had power to hurt, and there was only one mode of extracting it. This, and a good deal more than this, I said with much vehemence to Angus and Dr. Kneeland. I also said it, unless I am greatly mistaken, with just the neat combination of sorrow and anger which my supposed position of one assaulted by libellous rancour made natural. I refused to take my meals elsewhere than in my own room, and declared that I would never again address my cousin, and that, even provided she were willing to accord me an apology for her sickening falsehood, I would not accept it. What I demanded was an autopsy, and this, before the funeral, I must have.

Dr. Kneeland, though absolutely endorsing the stand which I took, strove to dissuade me from it. Angus, plainly bored by the whole contest, suppressed his sarcastic smiles and said nothing except now and then to grumble that Edna had behaved like the little imp of Satan she was. Edna herself went about the house with tossed-back head and obdurate carriage. Miss Ramsdell met me in the lower hall that same evening, and hurriedly whispered:

"She's told me what she's dared to state. Now you know the fiend that she is. She stole into the room as a spy. She was burning with jealousy of you because she thought her father had grown too fond of you. All she dares to say (the little demon!) is that she saw your right arm make a peculiar motion. It's a wonder she doesn't say that the glass of the dressing-table reflected much more than that to her, while she slipped in behind you from the sitting-room. This, *this* is Edna Mountstuart! This is the

scorpion in woman's form of whose venomous acts I told you. But you surely will not let her play upon you with impunity her scurvy tricks. You'll meet her front to front (I hope so with all my soul!) and show her that she has met her match!"

"Never fear," I responded. "Trust me, Miss Ramsdell, when I tell you that I shall try very hard to show her she *has* met her match."

And assuredly I did try. Not without avail, too, as it soon seemed to me. The next morning Dr. Kneeland had succeeded in getting two other physicians to Graydon Hall, and behind closed doors the autopsy took place.

I spent this time in slowly pacing the floor of my own room. Self-blame really disturbed me more than dread; I felt almost capable of chopping off the hand which had so stupidly omitted the simple turning of a key in a lock before it emptied that murderous fluid into the glass. But fear played no slight part in my mood. Dr. Kneeland had promised to knock at my door with his tidings as to the verdict of himself and his colleagues; and now, while the interval of waiting grew longer and longer, I found that anxiety deepened more and more. Surely it would need the most practised of toxicologists to dare make a certain declaration; but then the unexpected might happen (why not?) and if it did, how should I be able to preserve a guiltless demeanour when informed of damning discoveries?

One strange fact regarding my own nature now transpired to me. I was not quite the icy being I had believed myself. If I could not love, I assuredly could hate. Fear and hate—these were two emotions that might at least be called human. As I now thought of Edna my abomination of her seemed boundless. I imagined all sorts of tortures to which I could with delight subject her. Curiously enough, among other fancies, I dwelt upon that of watching her with all four limbs cut off, and said to myself that there would be keen joy in holding a vigil at her side while she lay a bleeding stump and begged from me the mercy of a death-stroke. It did not at all surprise me that I should feel no shadow of compunction in contemplating such agony

as this ; for had I not looked upon her cousin Blanche with perfect calmness while she writhed in the worst of physical pain, conscious at the time that every throe which beset her was most probably of my own creation, and realising as well, that the unique act of cruelty by which I had sought to kill her was committed upon one *who loved me with a beautiful and trustful love?* Surely fiendishness could go no further than this, and I was well aware that any mob of my fellow-creatures, cognisant of my behaviour toward Blanche, would have been apt to lynch me at the nearest tree or lamp-post, even if they did not tear me to pieces on first having clutched me in their grasp. But the horrors of my conduct with regard to Blanche were wholly apart from hate. I used to tell myself that if I had been like others I would have cared for her, pitied her, felt eager to shield her from the faintest harm. My feelings for the girl had been a blank, a nullity ; I neither liked nor disliked her. She was simply an impediment in my path toward wealth, and as such I had destroyed her with no more regret or satisfaction than if she had been an ant or a fly. But now I was immersed in a totally different tide of experience. The power of my hate thrilled me by its height and depth. Yes, this, in all its atrocious magnitude, was at least human. Ultra-human, in one sense, it might be, but doubtless it partook of something really vital, and was not the mere glacial torpor by which I had now for years boasted that all my sensibilities were stolidly ensheathed.

"What if this furious force of detestation," I here found myself musing, "should be a monition of some other correspondent capacity, undreamed of before? What if this tremendous receptivity to hate should presuppose and prophesy an equal receptivity in the way of love?"

Love? It seemed absurd for me to dream of such a mental condition. And yet, if one hidden doorway of the soul had suddenly been disclosed to me, why should not another some day reveal itself in the same unforeseen fashion? Through all the fret and stir of my present misgivings and forebodings, this question oddly thrust an appeal. It was haunting me when the awaited knock sounded.

I sprang forward, admitting Dr. Kneeland. "Well?" I queried, the instant we were face to face.

"It is just as I believed, Mr. Mountstuart," he informed me. "Our examination has proved the presence of nicotine in your uncle's body. Both the lungs and heart have suffered in marked degree from his long and excessive misuse of tobacco. The stomach and intestines also exhibit traces of a poisoning which must have gone on for years. But there is not a sign of his having died from any other direct and immediate cause that the cerebral paralysis whose effects I at once perceived."

A pang of triumph shot through me, but I remained outwardly very tranquil. "And so, doctor," I said, "this medical decision crushes Edna's affirmation?"

"Annihilatingly—of course. But you should never have heeded it. Indeed, it was not an affirmation; it was only a cruel and mean innuendo. But her little dagger has been blunted. She can use it no more; she would not dare."

CHAPTER XV.

I HAD gained my victory, but I chose not to revel in it. From then until I left Graydon Hall, three days after the funeral, I had a longing that Edna would seek to offer me some sort of apology, wishing to cast such an overture back in her teeth with contemptuous rebuttal. To my disappointment, however, she deported herself with an air of the most frigid reserve. I pretended to be dignifiedly content with my quiet conquest, and told Angus (feeling sure he would repeat the words to his sister) that I desired only to escape as soon as decency permitted from the roof which sheltered so scurrilous a vixen. At this Angus fell to begging me that I would stay on for at least a fortnight. "I know nothing about the management of the estate," he said, "and couldn't have a better instructor than you. Of course this is perfectly cold-blooded and selfish, but then I'm never anything else. I couldn't be if I tried."

But my answer was firmly negative. "No, Angus. The Hall has grown, I confess, fearfully distasteful to me."

"Because *she* is here," pouted Angus. "I've a good mind to send her up to London with her flaxen-haired fool of a governess, since her horror of my darling snakes has caused her to swear she will not even set foot within the grounds of Cleeve Lodge."

The will had by this time been opened, and nearly everything had been found bequeathed to Angus, so that this tone of mastership was not empty bluster. Edna had received but a small annuity, and had flown into one of her sulkiest rages, keeping shut for hours at a time within her own apartments.

"Mr. John Maurayne, our London family solicitor," I now said to Angus, "has written you stating that he will soon be here at the Hall. In every way, let me assure you, he will prove a far wiser counsellor than I. At some future time I will visit you, my dear cousin, provided you consent that your sister shall be absent while I am your guest."

Persuasion could not prevail with me. I quitted Graydon before the arrival of Maurayne. Once back in London, I found myself forced to see a number of inquiring friends. The mortality in our race had begun to cause much remark. "It is almost without precedent," said one commentator of my own sex. "There is a chance, Harold, that you will yourself soon become head of the family."

"Don't speak of it!" I returned with a shudder. "If I ever *should* inherit it, it would be to tremble at my own possible fate."

"You're superstitious, then?" said my friend. He was a young officer, with a good recent record in Africa for nerve and pluck.

"Not in the least, my dear Sir Francis. But one has dreams, fancies, fads."

"Right—one has. I understand you. Everybody would understand you. These things can't be explained, somehow. They're like burrs; they will stick. Or, better, they're like the fleas in the Soudan." Sir Francis Mountjoy threw back his blond head with a laugh that showed his strong, white

teeth. "Still, if you should really drift into Graydon Hall some day, my dear Harold," he went on, "I'll ask you to let me go down there and help you in the exorcism of its ghosts."

That winter in London was especially odious. The fogs began earlier than was their wont, and continued for weeks with a sluggish persistence that reminded one of the murky disposition of my cousin Edna. The hatred which I felt for her now and then startled me. As I have repeatedly stated in this chronicle of my dark deeds, remorse was wholly aloof from my nature. The traditional dreams and nightmares of the blood-stained assassin never intruded upon my rest. But dreams and nightmares which had to do with my abhorrence of Edna now troubled me in grisly legions. I saw her in many attitudes of open and insidious injury, sometimes advancing toward me with a knife that maniacally menaced me, sometimes dropping by stealth into my food what I knew to be a furtive pinch of poison. But blood-curdling enough was one dream that incessantly reduplicated itself. I stood arraigned before a shadowy judge and jury in an immense gloomy hall. Edna, pale as a spectre, loomed from the witness-box. In a droning voice she repeated the entire history of my crimes, not missing a single detail. She told how I had compassed the death of my Uncle Malcolm, and a groan of horror burst from the ghostly court. She told of my wily villainy to Egerton, and the same groan waxed louder still. She recounted my awful assassination of Blanche, and the groan became a shivering wail of execration. Then, at last, she narrated how I had slain Uncle Cecil, and, with a sharp yet mighty shriek, the whole assemblage rose, rushing toward me as if to tear me in pieces. *And I knew their mortal intent.* This was what made my nightmare so especially agonising and caused me to wake from it in a clammy sweat, with my heart thumping against my ribs.

Slowly, and yet with a distinct growing certainty, I now became aware that a most decisive change had taken hold of me. At last I had reached a secure haven of resolve: my further course of crime should be abandoned.

Yes, I would spare three lives—those of Angus, of Edna,

and of Olive. I would throw to the winds all future dreams both of gain and murder. The prize might be great, but the threat of risk was unendurable. Not that I had turned a coward; my courage was firm as ever. But Edna's attack, though repulsed, had shown me one thing: this was the decreased probability of my remaining undiscovered in the commission of those three more deadly acts which were needed to empower me with the heirship of Graydon. Four lives had already been extinguished through my subtle and conscienceless craft. A monitor now rose within my spirit, callous as any force of impulsion which had yet swayed it. The name of this new deterrent motive was Prudence.

I had Dyandotte, and a fairly liberal income besides. Life could give me, from to-day until the day that I departed from it, many real diversions and pastimes. In me was the zest of the scholar, and my library could feed this. In me was the zest of the scientist, and my laboratory could set this tingling, both through pleasures of application and study and through fervours of hope to achieve there some novel and startling result. On the other hand, I might pursue the path wherein I had planted my intrepid and audacious feet. But pitfalls and quicksands might, in the latter case, lurk for me, while to accept defeat yet exist at ease though with moderate means would offer a prospect shorn of perils and also clad with comforts.

There were moments when I sat in my London chambers and told myself that the persistent and depressing fogs were alone responsible for this radical change of purpose. One morning, after a walk through Piccadilly, in which the almost inky gloom of the atmosphere made me mistake the Haymarket for St. James's Street, I determined to seek Dyandotte and try the effect of altered skies. That same evening I left London, and soon afterward greeted the surprised servants at my cheerful though modest little country estate.

Two months of solitude now ensued for me. I strove to forget my haunting hate of Edna, and with at least partial success. Often I would spend several hours at a time in my laboratory; often I would pass as many hours in my library,

reading rather the modern scientific volumes which I had myself caused to be sent down to me from London than the old-time historians, dramatists, and poets with whose works my father had long ago stocked the bookshelves. Occasionally I would take long walks near the sea, watching it in all its mutable moods. Listless now and now turbulent, it for ever sang to me one song: "I am time made tangible, and yet I am eternity as well. Thousands like you have gazed upon me, and in the splendour or gloom of my breast are the flashes of longing or of despair with which their eyes have watched me. Some day I will perish as they have perished; my lights and shadows will fade into nothingness as theirs have faded. This world is but a caprice, a whim of the vast chaos beyond it. Its death will be of no more import in the enormous scheme of creation than the withering of the tiniest grass-blade. Hearken to my murmurs, and interpret them aright. They do not tell you the secret of the Sphinx, for she had no secret to impart. She cast herself into my depths because she had pretended to a wisdom beyond that of the fabled gods whose kin she boasted to be. *She had nothing to tell, for she knew nothing, and, more than all, she knew there was nothing to know.* The riddle of the universe is answerable but in one way: If Eternity were alive and conscious, which it is not, Nature would be its blended smile and frown, and Man would be its sneer."

I strove to feel contented with my new surrender of a half-accomplished design. But now and then angry ambition would pluck me by the sleeve. She came to me like a dark-winged angel, emissary of Satan, the dews of hell on the snaky dusk of her hair. She cried "shame" in my ears, and mocked me for infirm of purpose, as the weak Thane of Cawdor's hardier wife mocks him in the play. At such times I felt self-rebuke gnaw my heart as other men might have felt the wounding tooth of remorse. Then again would come scornful rebellion against such persuasions. Was I a mad fool to tempt fate still more boldly? Had I not heard her warning sound through all my senses, and would I not deserve, if I failed to heed it, that very ignominy of the

scaffold toward which her finger had seemed to point? No; I would pay satiric deference to those powers of the air which I had once despised. I would punish myself for my own unpardonable blunder. "Let well alone," runs the popular phrase; I would let ill alone. Discretion, they say, is the better part of valour; I would prove it also the warier side of sin.

And yet the stress of circumstance was all this while destined to sweep away my intent. Oddly enough, I had of late been studying the character and composition of certain excessively powerful poisons, no doubt because of my recent acquaintanceship with nicotine and the spirit of fascinated inquiry which this begot. Ranged on a shelf in my laboratory were several bottles of these destructive fluids, one or two of which I had prepared with gloved hands. It is quite possible that in calling forth such noxious potencies from their sleep amid the complex arcanum of nature I had been stirred by dimly personal motives. Edna's accusations had set me thinking. There had been criminals who believed every trace of their crimes buried beyond all chance of exhumation, and yet who had waked some morning to find the shadows of disgrace and death bathing them in twofold gloom. I had no dread of being either denounced or suspected for my outrageous past. But perhaps the manufacture of those fierce and swift poisons had some vague relation with the conceivable tricks and treacheries of coming events. Without fear of dying, I could not but prize the security of arming myself against calamitous happenings, even though they were wrapped in the drowsiest haze of doubt.

Tired of handling my chemicals and wishing to banish their odours from my nostrils, I passed one midwinter afternoon out upon the lawns of Dyandotte. It was a balmy day, and yet one with a hint of delicate coldness. The sky overhead was like a thin film of the most tenuous azure fur. The bare trees—those athletic trees of umbrageous Devonshire—had lost all look of gauntness; their nude skeletons were idealised into a more material semblance of the vapoury air itself. Southward sloped a breadth of russet-tinted down,

and beyond it sleepily flashed the quiescent sea. Withered stalks of late autumn flowers gave forth dry rustles as the languid marine winds touched them along the pathways I trod. Far inland a great leafless lapse of forest loomed against the pearly horizon, its branches melting together into a monochrome of smoky purple.

Visitors rarely came to Dyandotte, though I was popular enough among my neighbours. And now, when I saw a woman's shape advancing toward me from the gateway which led into the outer country beyond my limited domain, I fancied that she might be one of my few tenants, faring hither with some appeal to my purse. I had a charitable reputation among these kinds of people, though every penny I had given them had been latently begrudged. The prospective meeting with some new petitioner bored me just then past words. I was about turning my back on her and taking a short cut into the house, when I suddenly recognised Miss Ramsdell.

Amazement almost prevented me at first from going forward to greet her. Then, as I put forth an effort and played the affable host, it was to perceive that she approached me with faltering steps, and that she bore herself with much embarrassment.

"Do forgive me for daring to come," she began, as I took her limp hand in its rather dingy glove.

"Forgive you?" I said. "Why, how should I forgive myself if I did not bid you a very cordial welcome to Dyandotte?"

"Thanks—thanks," came her fluttered reply. "But of course I'm like a ghost to you."

"Like a very agreeable ghost," I answered, with ready gallantry. "Angus wrote me the other day," I continued, "that he was living at his former home, Cleeve Lodge, and that his sister still remained at Graydon Hall. Surely you are with her still? Or have you at last decided to leave her?"

"No, Mr. Mountstuart, I haven't left Edna—that is, I've been permitted a few days of absence. My only brother, who has a small house in Edminton, about twelve miles

northward, was seized not long ago with a violent illness. He's rector of the village and a widower, with no children. I came here to nurse him; he's better now, and I must soon go back to Graydon; Edna is already writing me very scolding letters. But before I returned to her I had an idea of taking the train (the trains are always so convenient, you know, between Edminton and Dyandotte) and paying you a—a short visit."

Her voice trembled as she ceased to speak, and her sweet, bland eyes pleadingly searched my face. I divined that the "short visit" which she had just mentioned must have cost her modesty a severe struggle. Why, then, had she made it?

"You took a very sensible resolve," I replied, with my usual native suavity. Then curiosity prompted me to add: "And you knew that I was here at home?"

"Some friends of my brother told me you were living here very quietly."

"Not so quietly, Miss Ramsdell, but that your presence breaks in the pleasantest way on my solitude."

She started, biting her lips. "You say this *now*, Mr. Mountstuart, but when I've spoken further you may feel like repenting your gracious words."

"Don't be too certain," I smiled. Somehow her coming was fraught for me with a peculiar subtle enjoyment. Had I surmised its radical significance? "Pray come indoors?" I pursued. "We can talk better at my fireside, perhaps, where I have a smouldering log that just takes the chill from the air and no more."

"This is a charming place," she said, beginning timidly to follow me as I led the way. "Of course, Mr. Mountstuart, I—I ought not to have come to it, alone, like this; and I do hope you will pardon my boldness."

"I'll smother it in hospitality, Miss Ramsdell. "I'll give you a glass of sherry and a biscuit."

But she would accept no refreshment. As she sat near my fire, surrounded by the somewhat modish appointments of my favourite room, I thought that she looked an almost shabbily pathetic figure. I knew that Edna had not given

her more than a beggarly salary, but till now I had never before noticed that she was ill-clad. Much of the gentleness appeared to have gone from her thinned and paler-grown face. It made me think of a lovely spring sky over which veils of rainy haze are being mercilessly drawn, while the mellow flutings of its breeze turn suddenly harsh. A spirit of discontent, of brooding unrest, of sleepless anxiety, seemed gazing forth at me from below that care-clouded brow, on which the flaxen hair now rippled with gray threads in its waves.

She made no preamble, no useless beating about the bush. "I came here to-day, Mr. Mountstuart," she soon said, "to ask you if you would lend me twenty pounds?"

"You are going to leave Edna," I said, not asking this, but stating it.

She gave a slight start. "I want to leave her. That is why I've asked you for this loan. I've calculated the precise time in which I can repay it—twelve months. That is, unless I fail in getting another position, and already I have what is almost a promise from certain people in the north—Durham, in fact. My brother would aid me, but his illness——"

"Enough, Miss Ramsdell," I broke in amiably. "The sum you have named shall be yours."

"Oh, you're too good, too kind!" she exclaimed, a flash of the most genuine gratitude sweeping across her face. "I can't but recollect how little you really know of me, and how many a person, with this meagre knowledge, would refuse point-blank!"

I smiled softly and shook my head. "You forget that I know a good deal of you—in one way."

"You mean?" she murmured, shrinking backward in her chair.

I purposely paused a short while before answering. Then I said, with tones at once measured, low and emphatic: "I'm aware that you were vilely treated by Edna, and that you greatly longed, at one time, for revenge upon her. Pray tell me: do you not long for it still?"

CHAPTER XVI.

She closed her eyes, and for an instant such a pallor flew over her face that I thought she was on the verge of a swoon. Rallying with much speed, however, she looked at me in a wild, worried way and responded: "I never told you that I longed for revenge. Surely I never told you so!"

"Oh, yes, you did. You told it me silently, if you please, but very distinctly."

She heaved a long, slow sigh. "Then you guessed?"

"You avowed your excessive hate of Edna, and you declared that it fascinated you—kept you at her side. And now you are determined to leave her. This seems a little strange to me. But, after all, no one should think *anything* strange in human nature. It has so many phases, variations."

"True—true. But I haven't changed. I still am preyed upon by my burning sense of wrong."

"But you are no longer in the spell of its curious fascination. You've escaped all that; you've got rid of it. You don't let it slip into your pillow o' nights; you are its mistress, its conqueror, in other words."

She drooped her eyes as I ended. Such a protracted silence now ensued that I felt sure she must find it awkward. But to me, as I deliberately kept mute, it was not awkward in the least; it was simply curious and interesting.

When she again lifted her face to me I saw in it the same wrathful and desperate look which she had disclosed last autumn in the library at Graydon. Then her answer broke forth with tumultuous effect.

"I'm not the mistress of my hate, and I'm not its conqueror. But I've thought I could get rid of its haunting spell by never looking again on the woman who stole from me the love of my life. If I went back to her the frenzy would seize me once more. You don't know what that frenzy means; you can't know, *you!* How *should* you know? It's true enough that she tried to injure you in the

meanest manner. But you are mentally well-ordered. And besides, she did not seek to hurt your heart; she did not thrust herself in between you and all that gladdened, freshened, beautified your life!"

I had a vision of Mr. Towse, with his inane smile, his cumbrous blue goggles, his bagged trousers, his mincing amble, and the thought swept through my mind that human nature in its phases and variations perhaps eclipsed even the range of my recent hints.

"No," I assented. "You're quite right. She did not make upon me the same harmful attempt that she made upon you. If she *had* done so, I might have felt this frenzy that you speak of. And so you're going to let her go unpunished?"

"Unpunished? How—how could I punish her?"

I fingered my watch-chain absently. "Oh, I fancied—but never mind."

"*What* did you fancy, Mr. Mountstuart?" She was now leaning eagerly forward.

"Nothing—nothing. She deserves punishment. You'll surely admit that?"

"Deserves it? Does a murderer deserve hanging?"

"She murdered your happiness."

"Ruthlessly—yes."

"And you're going to forgive her?"

"Forgive her? Never."

"But you're going to do the same thing as forgive her?"

"The same thing? I?"

"Of course. You're going to pass out of her ken. You've the bleeding wound that she inflicted upon you. It still *is* a bleeding wound?"

"Yes; it will never heal."

"And she gave it you. I don't doubt that she silently exults in having dealt it. I'm sure she's never repented of her conduct toward me. It isn't in her nature to repent of any shocking act that she may commit."

"Right—right. It is *not*."

I stared ruminatively at one of my boots. "Well, well, my dear Miss Ramsdell, I suppose your posture is immensely

fine. Indeed, I congratulate you upon it. You say that you do not forgive ; and yet *she will think you do.* Oh, yes ; Edna will not dream that you harbour the least resentment against her. It really fills *me* with indignation to think this thought ; how, then, must it affect you ? "

I ceased, here, as if I had recollected some important thing, and rose, going to my desk. "By-the-way," I proceeded, "whether you return to Graydon Hall or not, that twenty pounds—I'll make it five-and-twenty, by-the-way, with your permission—will doubtless prove equally acceptable." I unlocked a drawer of my desk, and soon was handing her five bank-notes of five pounds each. These I chose to give instead of a cheque. She took them in a dazed way, though words of thanks fell from her lips.

"You speak of my returning to Graydon Hall, Mr. Mountstuart ? I told you, did I not, that I'd made up my mind never to return there ? "

"Yes. Of course you said that. But will you really keep your resolution ? "

She rose, while putting the notes quite agitatedly into her purse. "Don't tempt me to go back there—please don't ! "

"Tempt you ? I ? If you go, you'll go. Somehow I think you really will go." Once again I steadily looked at her. Then, with great secret boldness, I added : "It seems to me that you'll never be contented till you've hit back, blow for blow."

She laughed faintly. "What lover had Edna that I could steal from her ? None."

"But you could strike another sort of blow."

"Another sort ? "

"You could pay her, though it might not be precisely in her own coin."

"Pay her—pay her ? Yet not in her own coin ? "

"My dear Miss Ramsdell, how you repeat one's words ! "

"Excuse me. I'm so surprised by them. You—you advise me, then, to do something dreadful ? "

"I don't advise."

"But you suggest."

"Doesn't your sense of injury do that?"

She lifted both hands, excitedly waving them before her face. "Oh, I've told you too much! I've let you see the full magnitude of my sense of injury! And what you say about her thinking that I've forgiven her! That's hard to bear—that's hard to bear!" And with the bleakest, saddest of cries she veered away, wandering aimlessly here and there throughout the room.

I went to my open desk and quietly rearranged some loose papers. "Why on earth," I said coolly, yet not without a clear vocal ring of apparent sympathy, "do you imagine that you've told me too much? You've simply told me that Edna Mountstuart has wronged you in the very basest manner. I've never repeated your statements to a living soul, and I never shall repeat them. Good heavens!" (and now I spoke with a film of airy carelessness over my really serious tones) "if you should kill the little wretch I'd never open my lips about it. I'd merely decide that she got no more than her due, and keep as dark as if I were your sworn accessory."

"Kill her? Kill her?"

As she repeated these two brief words, readvancing toward me, I had no longer the least doubt that her hate of Edna had made her insane and that this visit to me for the purpose of a monetary loan had been inspired by longing to rid herself from the meshes of a mania whose tangles she had felt tightening about her feet. "Before you go," I said, with the lightest tone of cordiality, pretending that I had quite failed to observe her distress and disarray, "let me show you my laboratory. This door leads to it, along the little passage that you see. I had it built several years ago, as an annex to this apartment. I hope you'll pardon the horrid smell of the whole queer den. You may not have known that I am something of a chemist?"

"I—I didn't know."

She was following me as these half-smothered words fell from her. I continued to ignore her evident perturbation, and when we stood together in the small chamber, which was uninviting enough except for the silvery winter sun-

shine that lit numberless flagons, jars and other prosaic if useful vessels, I talked volubly for some time, explaining with cursory levity the uses of this or that receptacle. Though not looking at her, I soon became aware, from her short responses, that she was pulling herself together, so to speak, and that the daring things I intended to say before we parted would be received with a calmness quite the reverse of her late confusion. "Recently," I at length said, "poisons have been interesting me. I've made quite a study of them." Here I pointed toward a small, low shelf, on which were ranged eight or nine bottles of moderate size. Each had on it a tiny label which indicated the name of the contents. I had not chosen to write these labels in my own hand, preferring to print each one of them in ink-wrought letters.

As I now turned and looked her full in the face I discerned there the blended affright and suspicion which my words had roused. Her glance seemed saying to me, "Do you mean to put a weapon in my hands?"

But I kept my own face inscrutable. "There's a keen charm in the study of these frightful compounds," I went on. "Here, for instance, is one that literally holds death in every drop." I took down a bottle of hydrocyanic acid, as I spoke, at once telling its name. "It's tremendously powerful. Actually, if it came into contract with the skin, at any portion of the body, it might instantly kill."

"*Might* instantly kill?" she said, with a queer questioning inflection, having taken the bottle from my grasp and begun to peer intently at its colourless fluid.

"I've never given it that sort of cutaneous trial," came my half indifferent answer. "But of one thing I'm very certain: a single drop in a wine-glass of liquid would kill the strongest man that ever lived. A bit of cambric moistened with it and pressed to the lips of any one who slept would cause him never to wake. One might say that so deadly a thing had no conceivable use," I added, after a slight pause. "But surely this would be a wrong statement."

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, in the case of some sick pet animal which one was fond of. Say you had a suffering dog that you had cared for and that you knew must sooner or later die. To end his miseries that way would be a mercy."

"Yes—yes; I see. You are quite right." Her eyes were stealing covert glances at me, yet I feigned total unconsciousness of their feverish movements. She slowly gave me back the bottle, and I replaced it on the shelf. Then I spoke of some of the other poisons, though taking care to add that they all had properties of a sort valuable in chemic investigation and experiment.

But it soon became plain to me that what I had said of the hydrocyanic acid had produced in her an effect of strong yet hidden fascination. Her gaze constantly wandered to the bottle which contained it. Purposely I now changed the subject, going to a window, raising it, and pointing to the sweet, misty landscape which lay beyond.

"How lovely is our dear old Devonshire," I said, "even during many of these midwinter days! Truly, I sometimes feel ashamed of myself for dabbling in my malodorous chemicals, when there is so much that is glad and tender and wholesome to lure me out of doors!"

She did not answer, and I leaned out of the window, as if charmed by the soft poetry of the prospect. Meanwhile I felt nearly certain that some sort of struggle was going on within her. My memory of her passionate behaviour there in the library at Graydon told me this, no less than my recent observance, keen and confirmatory. Would she lie to me in a minute or two more? I had given her full chance to do so. I had baited the hook and cast it; would she yield to my artful trick?

"Mr. Mountstuart."

I drew in my head from the open window and turned smilingly to meet her face. Had it not grown a shade or two paler, and was not the mouth rather oddly drawn down at either corner?

"Pardon me," I said; "for a few seconds I really lost myself."

"I wonder if you would care to let me have some of the acid you spoke of as so especially deadly?" she began.

"What? The hydrocyanic?" I said, amazedly.

"Yes."

"But you can't possibly want it for——" And then I broke off, aiding her, as it were, by my own self-interruption. "Oh, yes; I'd forgotten; perhaps you may want it—in the way that I mentioned."

She caught at these words, trying not to make her voice too vehement. "Yes—yes. I did want it just in that way." And somehow I knew that her next sentences were all quickly-composed falsehood. She had lied so little in her life that when lying now she both verbally and vocally betrayed herself. "My—my brother has a dog—a favourite dog, you know—that is old, quite old, and can't live much longer, though he lingers on in great distress. I—I think it would be a great mercy if he were quietly put out of existence" (her tones grew calmer, now, and her manner bolder and more secure), "so I've the idea of using the drug on him, if you will give me a little of it—say only a small vialful, such as one gets from the homœopathic doctors, you know. That would be quite enough for my purpose, would it not?"

"Quite enough for any purpose," I returned, with gay frankness. I was playing, at this point, the most innocent of parts. I meant to play it thoroughly, and convince her that I not only had perfect faith in her impromptu fabrication, but that I failed even to dream of the vaguest link between our present subject of converse and the talk we had lately held elsewhere. In this purpose I soon became certain that I had succeeded. When the vialful for which she had asked had been prepared and very carefully corked, I pretended extreme sudden hesitation about giving it to her.

"It is *so* dangerous!" I said.

"Yes—yes; I understand that! The pungent odour reached me most distinctly as you poured it from the larger bottle."

Her hand was stretched forth, and I saw it tremble. But

I assumed to be absorbed by my own reluctance. "The vial should have a label," I said, musingly. "Had I not better place one upon it?" Here I looked at her, with a dubious gravity, and started as if I had for the first time seen her hand, still outstretched.

"Oh, no; there's not the least need of that," she hurried. "I'll guard it with the greatest caution."

"Be sure to put a label on it yourself, then," I said, "when you reach home. Promise me that you will. Paste 'poison' on it, I mean, in large letters."

"Yes—I'll do that."

"You promise?" I persisted, smiling as I gave the vial to her hand.

"Yes—I promise." She slipped the awful little engine of death so speedily and covetously into a pocket of her gown that I felt almost forced to show some notice of this act, lest she herself should draw conclusions from my disregard of it.

"You're no doubt tired of this ill-smelling place," I soon said. "Let us go back into the other room."

She accompanied me thither, but had scarcely done so before she gave a dismayed little cry on glancing at the clock which ticked from the mantel.

"So late! How the time has flown! I really must go, or I shall miss the train back to Edminton."

"Let me go with you as far as the station," I proposed.

"Oh, you're more than kind. But I shall hate to trouble you."

"It will be a pleasure."

During our walk I touched upon the topic of her determination not to reseek Edna at Graydon Hall. "The more that I think of your wish to sever that relationship," I said, "the more sensibly I feel that you will be deciding."

She turned, staring at me fixedly. Did she doubt me now, and realise just the trap I had tried to set for her? This would indeed prove a most odious end of all my designing effort. "Don't mind," I hastened, "whatever impulsive words I may have spoken when we first met. You know how that young traitress wronged *me*. I felt the

old wound suddenly opened, I suppose—and it's not so very old, either; it's hardly had time to heal. Still, I should have delivered no such vengeful views, and I now beg to withdraw them."

"And so you think it better I should not go back to Graydon?"

"Yes—emphatically, yes," I declared. "Your going would merely prolong a bitterness which the future may mitigate."

"*And yet you will go back*," I was thinking. "I'd almost stake my life that you *will* go back!"

The train was on the verge of departure when we reached the station. She had barely time to buy her ticket and hurry out on the platform. As she entered the train she turned and waved me an adieu. I saw her face full for the last time, with the slant afternoon sun smiting it. Gentle and guileless a face as it had once seemed to me, it was now aflame with triumphant passion. Or did the level sun-rays lend it this lurid aspect?

Angus and I had kept up a correspondence ever since his father's death. Like this father he was fond of my company, and I think I may safely add that he preferred the absence of nearly all other human beings. I had managed to captivate him, and indeed he wrote, in one of his letters, with surly frankness, that he had never known what it was not to be bored to death by a half-hour with any of his fellow-creatures except myself. "You probably look upon me in return," he had the grim modesty to add, "as a sort of human accident, not really much above one of my reptiles. I shouldn't dispute this point with you, and I don't expect you to like me the least in the world. For that matter, I might even take a sudden detestation of you if you did. There's no telling what uncanny pranks I am capable of at a pinch."

About a fortnight after my interview with Miss Ramsdell, Angus wrote me from Cleeve Lodge, where he still persisted in living. The letter was curious enough, as it contained over a page of eulogy on the intelligence and tameness of his huge boa, Caligula. But a certain brief paragraph interested me more than all his statements regarding this

phenomenally wise serpent. It announced that he had lately heard from his sister at Graydon, and that she had again "taken under her wing that tiresome, tow-haired parasite, Miss Ramsdell."

"What will happen now?" I asked myself.

One morning a mighty thing happened. I took up a London journal shortly after breakfast, and in a few minutes almost shouted at a certain piece of astounding news there. Truly destiny was my sworn friend. Never stirring from Dyandotte, I had been able to send a bullet-like missile straight to a desired mark. And more than this, the whole gloriously lucky event had happened in a way that stripped me of the faintest imaginable complicity.

"Angus will soon communicate with me," I reflected, when the first acuteness of the shock had passed. "By this time he has surely reached the Hall. Within two or three hours at the furthest I should receive from him some sort of message.

Within less than an hour I had torn open a telegram from him, which read thus:

"*You have no doubt seen in the newspapers an account of this appalling thing. I am at Graydon. In the name of mercy come to me. I am half dead from the horror of it all.*"

I answered the telegram in these lines:

"*Expect me at once. The news has burst on me like a thunderbolt. What hideous fatality seems to be hanging over our unhappy race?*"

I lost no time in my journey; but the trains connected ill, and it was almost evening before I stood face to face with Angus in the old familiar library at Graydon Hall.

CHAPTER XVII.

He was haggard and visibly unstrung. His slim, claw-like hand burned against mine as he grasped it.

"You must have been horrified," he said.

"That is no word for it."

"Of all things to happen! Ah, what a volcano that

Ramsdell woman must have been, underneath all her sham meekness! I wish I'd known her better, now. Such an impish creature as that might have been diverting, not to say congenial.

He sank into a chair with a fatigued sigh. Even the presence of an awful disaster could not quite bridle his cynic tongue.

I sat down beside him. A huge log snapped and crackled jovially in the cavernous hearthplace of the large lamp-lit Gothic room. A servant came in, soft-footed and decorous, to announce dinner.

"I can't touch a morsel," said Angus.

"You must try," was my persuasive answer. I myself had an excellent appetite after my journey.

"Go into the dining-room," he said. "The very thought of food sickens me. I'll wait for you here."

"Well," I consented, with great hesitation. "But first tell me all that you know of this woful occurrence."

He looked straight into the red heart of the fire, with one frail arm supporting his head, half-dropped above the side of his big leathern chair.

"I was here at the Hall, you know; I'd come over about some affairs with the bailiff. I'd reached here in the morning, and had a little talk with Edna. We had quarrelled, as usual. She began to sneer at me for living solely in the society of snakes, just as she had done a hundred times before. I forget what I replied: it was probably something quite as prosaic as a request that she would mind her own business. But I'm sure I said that she never found me at all concerning myself with any business of hers. Here she retorted harshly that it would be better if I concerned myself with it a good deal more, since I doled her out so stingy an allowance that she doubted if she could go up to London this year and spend the season there, as she had wished to do. At this I burst into a vociferous laugh, and told her with much mockery that she would certainly cut a great dash at the next Buckingham Palace drawing-room. This made her very angry, and she answered with something about my dwarfish little misshapen body. I didn't specially

mind what she said. We'd been quarrelling like that since our nursery days. I very rarely say anything agreeable to anybody, and I'm afraid some of my worst snarls have been saved for the ears of that poor girl. I hadn't intended to cut her short on her allowance, however. It always seemed to me that she didn't require much for gowns and general raiment. I'd have given her more if she'd asked me civilly, but the devil of it has always been between us, I suppose, that neither of us could ever get through three civil sentences in talking to one another."

His piping voice, oddly altered by inflections that hinted of genuine regret, ceased at this point. I watched for a moment his queer wizened shape, bathed in the ruddy firelight. Then I said, breaking the pause with soft inquiry: "And afterward, Angus?"

"Afterward? Well, for an hour or two I was closeted with the bailiff, Smithson. He's a horrid, sycophantic person, with muddy whites to his eyes. I do so hate people who have muddy whites to their eyes. I got away from him by telling him it was time for luncheon. I had hardly understood half of what he said to me about the affairs of the estate. I kept thinking of dear old Caligula at home, and wondering whether he would get his milk and his rabbits all right during my absence. I'm probably the most idiotic of *grands seigneurs;* I detest accounts and figures, and all that sort of tiresome thing, though I'm avaricious and grasping to a marked degree. If I were only not so stupid and so easily bored by these tiresome monetary *pros* and *cons*, I'd have made a splendid miser. I've all the dismal qualities of one. But where am I wandering?"

"Into your silly little realm of egotism," I said to myself, "you precious young Diogenes!"

Aloud, very tenderly, I replied: "You were speaking to me of the tragedy, you know, my dear Angus. It began with——?"

"A shriek from Edna's dressing-room as I was passing her door on my way to my own apartments. The shriek was so keen and appealing that I paused only an instant before I turned the knob and dashed in. Edna was standing in the

centre of the room, with her arms outspread and a look of the wildest horror on her face. She reeled toward me, but before she had taken three steps she fell. The room has two inner doorways. Miss Ramsdell stood in one of them as I entered. I saw her glide away as I stooped to raise Edna. But even then she was dead."

"So suddenly!" I breathed. "How appalling!"

"The instant that I discovered the truth I rang and rang for assistance. Servants came flocking into the room. Presently one of them handed me a glass of lemonade (Edna was always fond of lemonade, and I used to scoff at her for drinking it, telling her it meant 'sour to the sour' instead of 'sweets to the sweet')—a glass, I say, half-full, as if she had just partly drained it. A sharp but not unpleasant odour of bitter almonds rose from the glass. I remembered Miss Ramsdell, and in the twinkling of an eye certain old suspicions recurred to me concerning my former tutor, Towse. I knew Edna was incapable of having killed herself. When the first tumult and confusion were over I asked for Miss Ramsdell. Somebody said that she had gone to her room on the upper floor and locked herself in.

"I felt certain of the truth, then. But as yet I gave no directions regarding police interference; perhaps I was too mentally bewildered. Not having much physical strength to boast of, I delayed my visit to the locked chamber for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and then slipped upstairs alone. All morbid and strange things interest me. For the time, I almost forgot that Edna was a corpse, in the intensity of my eagerness to see and talk with this woman whom I already believed to be her assassin. Temporarily I felt myself drawn toward her almost as much as if she had been a rattlesnake. Reaching her door, I turned its knob without avail.

"'Miss Ramsdell,' I called; 'Miss Ramsdell.'

"There was no answer, and I repeated her name twice. Then her voice sounded, evidently coming from a short distance off.

"'You are Angus Mountstuart?'

"'Yes.'

"'You're alone?'

"'Yes.'

"'Is that really true? Will you swear it?'

"'I swear it,' was my reply. 'Not a soul is here with me. There are only servants in the house, as you know, and these are all downstairs.'

"Quite soon afterward the key was turned in the lock. She did not open the door; I opened it myself. When I entered she was standing at the further end of the room, close by the one large window which it contains. She never moved from that place throughout the conference which followed. I saw that she was very white, and that her chin was stirred, every few seconds, by nervous twitches.

"Breaking the silence with a bludgeon-blow, I said to her: 'Edna's dead, as I suppose you know. Are you her murderess? Your presence in her room at the time she fell, and your conduct afterward, have made me believe that you are the cause of her drinking poisoned lemonade.'

"She nodded solemnly. 'I was; I killed her,' she said, with a voice so calm that it implied madness far more than if she had shrieked the words. 'I tried not to come back to her after the leave of absence that she gave me, but something dragged me here. I had procured that poison, and I knew I should use it on her if we met again. She separated me in the basest way from the man I dearly loved. That man was John Towse. She came between us with as mean a spirit of malice as one woman ever showed to another, and afterward, when she had parted us for ever, she told me with horrid exultation of her low act. At first the grief of it all deadened me. Then I got to hate her so that it frightened me. Afterward I ceased to be frightened; the hate became to me like one of your snakes, Mr. Mountstuart—one of those favourite snakes that I've seen you twine round your wrist and talk to. Well, I came back to her—I was drawn back by an insolent letter she wrote me, stating that I owed her service for money already received. That was a lie, and the whole tone of the letter set me tingling anew. When I'd got here again I tried several

times to kill her with the poison and lost courage at the very moment that I needed it most. But to-day I braced myself and did the deed. She had had the lemonade made for her and I watched her pour out a glass of it. She'd complained of a headache all the morning, and I said to her, just as she was about putting the glass to her lips, that I had with me a liquid which my brother had taken for headache when he was so very ill, and which had given him great relief. 'It smells of bitter almonds,' I added; 'but though it's rather pungent, I don't think a few drops would make an unpalatable flavouring.'

"'She looked at me with a weary and irritated air, and suddenly flung me a scoffing smile. 'Ramsdell,' she said (it always gave her a wicked pleasure to call me by my last name like that, just as if I were a servant instead of being far more of a lady than she herself had ever dreamed of being), 'Ramsdell, I often wonder why you stick to me so and occasionally do decent little things for me. I wouldn't cross the room, Ramsdell, to help a headache of *yours*. I like to have you in call; but generally for the purpose of sneering at you, as you're well aware. That brother of mine gave me this headache. He's a thorough little beast, and he's making me a pauper's allowance here at Graydon. I told him so this morning, and he insulted me, as he usually does when we have five minutes' talk together. Yes, Angus has given me my headache. If papa hadn't died so suddenly he'd have put me down in his will for at least a thousand pounds a year. I'd spoken to him about it, and though he'd scowled and sniffed, I'm sure that he—— But never mind, Ramsdell; he's dead now, and I've scarcely a penny, except what that nasty little snake-charmer of a brother chooses to give me.'

"'By this time, with perfectly firm hand, I put forward the small bottle that I had drawn from my pocket. I didn't uncork it until she gave me a sign to do so. And then, with nerves that had grown steel, I added a thimbleful of the poison to the draught that she held. 'How strong it smells!' she said. I feared she would not drink it then, and I lowered my eyes, not daring to meet hers, and afraid

to find out whether they were fixed on my face or no. 'Drink it,' I managed to say, fearing that now there might indeed be a slip between the cup and the lip, and that defeat would come at the very instant of victory. 'Drink it,' I went on, dreading that my voice would betray me; 'it will do you a great deal of good; it helped my poor brother wonderfully.' Still, I did not dare to look at her; and while I re-corked the bottle and thrust it back whence it had come, I heard "failure," "failure" ring through my brain.

"'But, like a flash, everything changed. She drank from the glass; I caught a faint gurgling sound that told me this, and then I turned, gazing boldly at her, with triumph at full glare in my soul, like a red banner spread out to the wind.

"'She placed the glass on a small table after having drunk half of it, as you no doubt saw. Even then she was gasping queerly. 'I'm—I'm so dizzy,' she cried. Her little black eyes glared at me, bulging from their sockets. '*You've poisoned me, you devil!*' she quavered, as one might speak while one was drowning and about to sink for the third time. I can't tell you what delight that husky little burst of denunciation gave me. I seemed to have been living for it ever since she jeered at my broken heart months ago and boasted of her own dark deceit. In another moment she wheeled round, and it was then that she gave the wild shriek which brought you into the room.'

"Miss Ramsdell said all this, my dear Harold, with a voice no louder than mine is now. When she ended I stood before her almost stunned. Of course I thought her a monster, and irrepressibly admired her, as I can't help admiring all monsters. But as soon as I could find speech I said to her: 'So you *are* a murderess, and openly admit it. I've but one duty to perform, Miss Ramsdell ——'

"But here she broke in upon my words with the keenest, most blood-curdling laugh. So the lost souls in hell might laugh—if there were a hell for them to laugh in.

"'You can perform one duty toward me, Angus Mountstuart!' she cried. 'You can give me decent burial, if you please. And if you don't, I'll get it in spite of you!'

"With that she snatched something from the folds of her dress. I darted to her side, but before I could reach her she had raised the something to her lips and then flung it on the floor. There followed a little crash like that of splintered glass, and I smelled the same odour of bitter almonds that rose from Edna's fatal draught. The suddenness with which death came to her was almost like being smitten by lightning. She did not even fall as though there were the least life in her *when* she fell. It was just as if you had toppled over an upright corpse.

"I hurried downstairs, confident that she was dead, and bidding my people go to her. Then I sent messages to certain of the neighbours, thinking it more advisable. And of course the police had to be summoned. All of yesterday was one racking turmoil to me. The interviews I was forced to hold; the examination by the coroner; the prying, ferreting questions from those who should have had better taste than to ask them; the coming of the undertaker and the laying out of the bodies—oh, it has all been to me, Harold, the most insupportable bore!"

He used the word "bore" where so many another narrator would have used "grief" or "sorrow." This was characteristic of him, and I could not but recall our close kinship as I heard it.

They took Miss Ramsdell's body away on the morrow, and Edna's funeral occurred two days later. This last death of a Mountstuart caused universal comment. Several of the leading journals throughout the country discussed it in terms of melancholy reflection. One of the more sensational sheets which chanced to fall under my eye, headed an article flamboyantly with—"The Curse of the Mountstuarts." It spoke of the rapid series of deaths which had bereaved this ancient and respected family, and declared that fate seemed determined to extinguish the race altogether. Miss Ramsdell's act was by all accredited to insanity.

"Thus we see," concluded one newspaper with gloomy succinctness, "that two on this strange mortuary list (meaning, of course, Egerton and Edna) have been the

victims of insane or semi-insane murderers." Angus was more than once referred to as the present heir, and in one or two sheets of a "personal" character his queer life and habits were more than simply mentioned. Here and there I found an allusion to myself, but always in highly courteous terms, as the Mountstuart of the so-called "Dyandotte branch," who now stood third in succession to the fine inheritance. Everything concerning Olive betokened the vaguest sort of information. One newspaper even affirmed that she was living with an uncle in Australia.

Angus, when all the mournful ceremonies at the Hall were ended, begged that I would go with him back to his chosen home in Essex. I gently refused at first, and then accepted. I had meant all the while to accept.

The truth was, I had now become influenced by a sharp reaction. All the old inertia had vanished; I was myself again—my secure Mephistophelean self. The passing of Edna had reconstructed me. With grand self-gratulation I regarded the work I had already accomplished. Could anything, as it stood, be more diabolically skilful? Uncle Malcolm's extinction had ranked high in what I chose to term the fine art of assassination. But Egerton's had ranked still higher; its method, more toilfully astute and more brilliantly distinctive, had almost touched the summit of inventive crime. Still, real sublimity of fiendishness had not yet been reached. Blanche's death had meant that. Never, I proudly told myself, in all the records of purely abominable homicide, had so ingenious and original a murder been devised.

Enthusiasm and ardour woke in me. I reproached myself for having permitted the charge of the dead Edna to so demoralise and dispirit my splendid native impulse toward the building of a unique achievement. Her death, too, had been a master-stroke of *finesse*. As in the case of Egerton and Blanche, had I not put forth powers of destruction with an incomparable shrewdness and tact?

A great boldness now inspired me. I felt myself empowered with an immense security. At the same time impatience began to gnaw my vitals. I stood blameless

before all the world. That was just how I had desired to stand. My recession after the accusative outburst of Edna had been rank cowardice. I must atone for it; I would atone for it. My new bravery seemed to me like a hardy young builder, who sweeps away rotten fundaments to plant strength in the coigns of weakness. Notwithstanding, it irked me unspeakably to go and dwell with Angus at Cleeve Lodge. Still, I went, wondering how I would be able to accomplish his death, and yet positively thrilling with confidence in my powers to compass this result.

"It must be only a short visit," I told him, "for my affairs at Dyandotte are urgent. The estate is small enough compared with yours, my dear Angus, but still its exigencies of management cannot be scorned." (And I soon had occasion to recall agreeably this rather careless monition.)

"Oh, you'll have lots of leisure at the Lodge," replied Angus, "and I'll make Caligula coil himself too tightly round you to prevent you from going up to London, which I know is really your sham name for the 'exigencies' at Dyandotte."

I took no notice of this characteristic impertinence, merely saying, with an unconcealed shiver:

"If Caligula, as you call him, dares to come within ten yards of me, I shall quit Cleeve Lodge inside the hour."

But here I failed to keep my word. The magnificent snake, after a day or two was tolerated at a much nearer distance. True, I abominated him, and yet I could not help admiring him. He was exceptionally, almost phenomenally, tame. Angus declared that the mighty sinuous thing loved him, but this alleged affection I could not at all see. Caligula loved his milk, which at times he drank with gusto, and his live shivering rabbits, which he first crushed to death in his monstrous coils, then beslimed revoltingly, and then swallowed with sluggish zeal.

It took me at least three days to become used to the full ghastliness of Caligula. With the "Serpentorium" it was different. This I visited repeatedly, and, in so visiting, enjoyed with zest Angus's comments upon the various eerie denizens which its numberless glass cases contained.

Here were moccasins, with sultry little lidless eyes that held untold malice ; here was the crotalus, in differing forms and hues, with its curious tail, hinting of that sharp alarum which has flooded so many a stout heart in fright ; here was the xenodon, harmless, yet "hog-nosed" and revolting ; here was the horned water-viper, swimming about in its miniature tank ; here were scores of others to which a trained herpetologist like Angus could have given some classic or vernacular name.

My cousin had an especial apartment for his beloved boa, Caligula. It was small, and heated so insufferably that to remain there five minutes caused the sweat to bead one's forehead. From its centre rose a bare tree, hardy and thick of bough, round which this immense serpent loved to coil. Angus had assured me of its tameness before I invaded its realm, but I soon discovered that this "tameness" was more horrifying than might have seemed an opposite state. Surely Caligula was phenomenal in his activity. The great serpents which I had seen at the "Zoo" in London and the Jardin des Plantes in Paris were usually torpid or semi-sluggish. Angus's favourite, however (perhaps because of the peculiar nourishment with which he supplied it) was for ever writhing and squirming. He undoubtedly knew his owner, and the welcome which he gave Angus, though a great credit to his "intelligence," was appalling in its weird ardour. He slipped from his tree with an incomparable swiftness and grace. His forked tongue flickered between his broad lips in a way that by no means hinted of the really venomless family to which he belonged. Advancing toward Angus with sweeps and curves of his thick, spotted body that were the very enchantment of animal motion, it looked for an instant as if my cousin were prey which he had bent himself upon devouring. But no such grim thing happened. Instead of devouring his master, Caligula clad him in a living garment of yellow-dappled coils. The big flat oval head did not really touch the lips of Angus, but, reared on its lissome arch of neck, it almost met them with the ever-flickering tongue. At times he was nearly weighed to the ground by this grotesque and ponderous welcome. I used

to watch him and think what danger he ran; for the so-termed tameness of Caligula might at any moment become ferocity. But Angus fairly revelled in the caresses of his favourite. He insisted that they could not ever harm him, since Caligula was incapable of doing him the faintest injury.

"Why do you love," I asked him on the second morning of my sojourn at Cleeve Lodge, "what all the world holds to be loveless?"

He showed his sharp, irregular teeth in a gelid smile. "I don't know, except it be because they are a despised race of creatures."

"But, my dear Angus," I urged, "you are not a philanthropist."

"Philanthropist!" he cried, with a little rattle of laughter that resembled the sound which might have been made by one of his own crotalidæ. "*I?* Good Heavens, Harold, are you cracking a personal joke at me?"

"Not at all. But I don't see why you give the ophidian tribes your great regard from the fact of their being a despised race of creatures, *unless* you do so through a sympathy with their humiliated condition."

We were seated in the pretty morning-room of the Lodge, lately rendered infernal to me by the entrance of Caligula, whom my young kinsman had chosen to conduct through one of its doorways, luring him thither by the blended means of a great glass bowl filled with milk and a low, musical whistle that the serpent had learned to know and follow. The sight of the enormous and sinuous thing, rolling its lithe length along the soft carpet of the chamber, filled me with untold disrelish. I had by this time lost all physical dread of it, though I still distrusted its possible change of mood. There was undoubtedly a majesty in its very supineness that appealed to our human sense of rhythm and harmony. The writhings and meanderings of Caligula were surely a very poem of motion, and his dull, scaly skin had all the soft richness of tint that one may sometimes note in the best Oriental tapestries. There could be no question of his incomparable grandeur and beauty. But, at the same

time, associated with the appointment of a domestic interior, his presence had every sort of revolting attribute. While he glided gloriously toward the cheerful wood-fire, with his proud, delicate head swaying in hair and his flexible rings a noiseless corporeal melody, as though one should see the cadence of wind materialised in alert and agile flesh, I nevertheless decided that he was most obnoxiously out of place.

Angus appeared to muse a moment before he broke out with an impetuous answer. "It *is* sympathy, in a way. You've hit the mark, Harold. I've a fellowship with these pariahs of the prone and crawling world. I'm a pariah of the same kind myself, more or less. When I was seven years old I had a little playmate of my own age, and one day, when we both looked into a forest spring together and saw our forms and faces mirrored there, I sprang back and struck him because he was so pretty and I so ugly. You'll say—you with your benevolent and optimistic spirit—that for this very reason I should have got to cherish compassionately the uncomely and misshapen of my own kind. But no; my self-recognition, so to speak, took a different form. When I look at anything so splendidly handsome as Caligula yonder, I gain the subtle yet satisfying consolation that one can be physically beautiful and yet shunned with a universal antipathy."

"But, my dear Angus," I said, "you have no right to drop into the moody groove of fancying yourself shunned. There's many a lovely girl whom you might easily marry, if——"

"If I chose to buy her!" he struck in sneeringly. Here he rose, and I saw his small eyes flash from below his pale, narrow, knitted brows. "But I don't choose, and I never shall! Womankind is a lost paradise for me, Harold!" He rose and turned fiercely in my direction, for an instant, throwing out both arms (too long for his half-deformed little body) with a gesture of pitiable self-revealment.

"What woman," he cried, "could ever truly care for such an absurd pigmy as this?" He laughed with extreme harshness and threw back his head in hilarious mockery. "Oh, I don't doubt I'll buy their smiles before long. But

every purchase will be most coldly commercial, I can assure you. I'll make no such fool of myself as to drift into sentiment. Young as I am, I've looked all the nonsense of *that* course full in the face. To feel like a Romeo and be secretly shrunk from as a Caliban or a Bottom! Not I! The women I pay court to shall never have it in their power to rate me as a romantic love-maker. Looking-glasses have long ago taught me lessons. I'll wear my purse very showily at my girdle, if you please, but I'll never be such a dunce as to wear my heart on my sleeve."

There was more than merely bitter humour in this outburst; there was a smouldering kind of despair as well. "So this is how the land lies," I said to myself. But immediately I answered aloud: "Who on earth taught you all this worldly wisdom at your time of life, my dear Angus?"

"Caligula taught it," he cried. "Didn't you, my darling?" And he darted toward the serpent, where it now lay basking in the fire-glow. With both hands he caught the thick compact oval of its scaled head and laid it fondly against his breast in a nursing fashion. The act struck me as one of foolhardy temerity, even in spite of those previous familiar handlings of this python which I had already witnessed.

"Be careful, my dear Angus," I said, with kindliest monition. "These creatures may be tame in a certain sense, my boy, but pray remember that they come, like tigers, from an untold ancestry of stranglers. They——"

But here my words ended. Whether some sudden caprice of savagery now attacked the monster, or whether a stimulant effect of the fire-warmth had swiftly controlled him, he reared himself in a trice and shot several spirals of muscular flesh round Angus with an ardour that I had not yet seen. There was no "affection" in this abrupt embrace. My cousin gave a sharp cry, though one not of fright, but anger. In another second it was plain to me that his left hand had become pinioned. Then I perceived that with his right hand he was striking the snake violently.

"Help me, Harold!" he called. "Help me! He's got the devil in him! Good God! he wants to crush me! *Harold!* Tear him away—get something and stab him

with it! There's a—a sharp thing—a paper-cutter on the table yonder. I—I'll be dead in a minute if you don't help me. *Harold!*"

That last word was a desperate shriek. I dashed forward as it rang through the room. . . . And then I paused.

"What a chance! What a chance!" leaped through my mind. "*It's fate again. Let him die like this!*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

All had thus far so quickly happened that to portray it in proper way would be to take the very lightning for one's pen. As I paused it was to feel that Angus had lost all chance of his life. Then, in a few more seconds, everything changed.

The coils of Caligula loosened; in some rapid and queer way he had become placated. Realising that my delay as a rescuer, brief though it had been, might already have worked to my detriment with his master, I hurried for the paper-cutter which lay on a near table—something Oriental and dirk-like, whose damascened prettiness my host had chanced to show me on the previous night. This I clutched, and sped with it to Angus. He was now partly free, no longer fearful of being killed, and possessed by a strong rage against his late assailant. As the great snake sank in relaxed loops away from him, he snatched the long, ornate knife out of my grasp, and struck at Caligula with it, inflicting a wound in his cold, sinewy flesh. Then darting backward, just as complete escape became possible, he called to me:

"Come—come! He may strike back now, the devil take him!"

I did not need his warning. We were standing beside one another in no time, with a stout door of the chamber shut between ourselves and the refractory serpent.

"I thought you'd *never* help me," Angus panted, white to the lips and visibly tremulous, though far more with rage than fear.

"I was so appalled, Angus," I began.

"Oh, yes; certainly; I understand. You behaved with great courage. He patted me excitedly on the shoulder. "So many other men would have lost their wits outright."

This was reassuring. He had evidently not the vaguest suspicion of what I meant by those few inactive moments. Quite soon he put his ear to the panel of the door, listening.

"I wonder if he is thrashing the furniture in a fit of fury, Harold. It seems very quiet inside there."

"Perhaps you've seriously hurt him," I said. "You struck a rather sharp blow, did you not?"

"Yes, yes—and I meant to strike it!" he cried.

"Perhaps you killed him."

"Killed him!" he echoed, with a sudden wail in his tones. "Oh, no, *no!* Do you believe so?" He caught the knob of the door.

"Good heavens, Angus!" I cried, "you're not going back there?"

"Yes. I must. The thought of having killed him is too horrible!"

"But, Angus——"

"You needn't go in with me!" His manner was wholly altered now. He had a sort of grief-stricken and penitent look. "Perhaps, after all, the poor fellow was only playing. Treachery *can't* be in his character; I've studied it thoroughly, and I'm sure he's the very most honourable of snakes."

This struck me as boringly flippant, even after all the tawdry jargon I had heard of a like sort since my stay at the Lodge began.

"Very well," I said, disguising a secret weariness and scorn. "Take this mad course if you please. But you do it quite against my counsel."

Meanwhile I was thinking how entirely pleasant an end of the whole eccentric incident it would prove if my rash young cousin should receive from his mottled playfellow a real asphyxiating hug.

But no such cheering event followed. In a little while I heard a cry from Angus, it is true, but a cry of grief rather than fright. And when I ventured into the apartment again it was to find him crouched beside the limp and languid

shape of the serpent, shaken by violent sobs. "Oh, forgive me, my dear, dear Caligula!" he moaned, with the big tears glistening on his cheeks. "I know you never meant to injure me in the least; and here I've stabbed you so cruelly that perhaps you may die!"

But Caligula did not die. The blow of Angus weakened him terribly, and for several days put his life in peril. He refused all food, and lay gathered in layer over layer of sluggish anatomy. He revealed not the faintest ill-will toward his late assailant, who, in turn, was racked by contrition and despair. Nothing could exceed the devotion of Angus.

"You actually spend five or six hours a day with your sick snake," I said to him, one morning. "Such infatuation is certainly rather droll."

"Don't call it infatuation, Harold. Call it repentance. Caligula hadn't the vaguest intention of harming me. I feel that I've done him a dreadful wrong."

"In that case," I replied," you are making a very honourable atonement. But really, Angus," I broke off, "as your kinsman and loyal friend I must ask you about your sister Olive."

"Olive?" he said, starting a little, and beginning to stroke his chin. "Ah, yes—true." He scanned my face, with a gleam of unwonted kindliness in the usual opaque dusk of his eyes. "You're always so thoughtful, Harold; you remember about her, don't you?"

Naturally I "remembered about her." She and her brother were now the sole impediments between myself and triumph. "You wrote her at once, you told me, Angus, after Edna's unhappy death."

"Yes—yes. True enough. "I'd really forgotten. Caligula's illness has put so many things out of my head. Now, don't sneer at me, Harold."

"I'm not sneering."

"I know you're not. It's like me to accuse you of it. But I didn't mean to accuse you. I sneer so much that I'm for ever believing others are just as ungracious. Olive was the really human one out of us three children. She hadn't

a trace of either Edna's or my own nature. She was all charity and loving-kindness. Edna literally drove her away, you know. She'd never have accepted that invitation of Aunt Elphinstone to go and live with her in Canada if it hadn't been for father's command. He saw that Olive would only go on leading a dog's life with that jealous twin-sister, who could never forgive her for being so devilishly pretty and amiable. I dare say these two sudden deaths (father's and Edna's) may bring her home again quite soon. I sincerely hope they will *not*. I shouldn't know what on earth to do with Olive. No doubt she'd hate to live at Graydon all alone, and she couldn't very well live here with me. I was often quite as unkind to her as Edna, when everything's told. She always irritated me, with her shapeliness and good looks. Of course she was 'lovable,' as the word goes; who couldn't be, with her bodily graces that every one was so quick to shower praises on? Her last letter about father's death was very tender and affectionate; I suppose 'tender' and 'affectionate' are the right words for it. Of course Mrs. Elphinstone will remind her that she is heir-presumptive now. I haven't made any will. If I don't make any she'll get everything, provided she outlives me." He laughed, crisply and stridently, here. "I couldn't find it in my heart to make a will and cut poor Caligula off. And though I believe he's going to recover, poor old fellow, Maurayne, our wise solicitor, assures me that one can't make a South American boa-constrictor one's legal inheritor."

"Maurayne never said a word of the sort, and you know it," I replied good-humouredly, though my genial mien smothered both disgust and ire.

Caligula soon did show marked signs of recovery. He continued, however, a good deal of an invalid. I often watched him when his bettered health made the vigilance of his nurse less needful, and I wondered at these times why his exceptional intelligence failed to coexist with the slightest sense of revenge. But he treated Angus very much as if no quarrel had ever occurred between them. Now and then he was quite stolidly irresponsive, but I could discern in him no trace of harboured resentment.

Meanwhile his wound failed to heal at all speedily. I sometimes regarded rather intently its still gaping orifice. An idea had been taking shape in my mind. I felt thoroughly courageous and firm of nerve now. By one more stroke, audacious and terribly novel as that which had slain Blanche, I might be able to sweep Angus from the planet which he incontestably quite failed to adorn.

A letter from Olive, bearing the Canadian postmark, reached Cleeve Lodge in less than a week after Angus's and my own mention of her. She wrote with great sweetness and eloquence; an authentic sorrow and consternation breathed equally in every line. She declared that her return appeared to her in the light of a pressing duty, and that she would most willingly obey the first brotherly summons that should reach her from England. True, her home there in Canada was happiness itself. Mrs. Elphinstone had given her a mother's love, and this lady's niece, Roberta Sterling, had become to her the dearest of friends. She had been very happy in her present life until these two dark messages had reached her from over sea. Now she wanted to go back, even if but transiently, and she waited Angus's reply, granting her full permission to make the voyage.

"Give fresh proof of your kind heart," said Angus to me, after I had read the letter, "and do write her in my place! I shall be mightily indebted if only you will. Just now I feel that to achieve an actual letter would be past my feeble forces." And he heaved a sigh, glancing toward Caligula's room, whither the torpid creature had been dragged by himself and two servants a short while after his enervating injury.

I consented to write Olive. The idea of dissuading her from a return to England was one which I had grown secretly to relish. When she and I next met I preferred that it should be in Canada, not England. I composed my letter in a style of easy cordiality and kinsmanlike affection. I begged that she would not think of reseeking her former home at present. "You would come back," I wrote, "into an atmosphere always unsocial and now far more so than

ever. Angus loves loneliness better than before, and he is just as much dominated as ever by a certain abnormal cult which I need not define. By all means, my dear Olive, remain with your genial guardian and your treasured young friend. Life, be sure, is not rich in such precious possessions for the soul. It is possible that I may before long pay you a visit in your colonial surroundings. I have always had the greatest desire to see the marvels of Niagara, and I remember that the summer home of Mrs. Elphinstone is not far from the spot where this king of cataracts long has held his reign."

Angus warmly thanked me when I read him this letter before posting it. "You haven't written half enough," he politely snarled, "about my being a deplorable misanthrope. And as for your going over there, Harold, I'm inclined to applaud it as a superb idea. You'll represent the family, as it were, and a deuced sight more capably than I could do. When you go over I shall expect Olive to have thrills of thanks that she can present into that new world of hers a Mountstuart so very much more personally attractive than the sour little dwarf who's got the estates over here."

"When will you stop flinging foolish slurs at yourself?" I said, with mild-voiced reproach.

"When I'm in my coffin," snapped Angus, with a flying yet acrid smile.

But meanwhile to my inner self I was affirming: "The sour little dwarf you've just mentioned will not exist when I go to Canada. If I go at all he will be lying asleep beside the five others of his race whose deaths I have compassed, in the fine old family vault at Graydon Hall."

For by this time the method of my new deadly intent was now quite clear to me. I had made up my mind that the safest and surest way of killing Angus was to employ his cherished serpent as my accomplice. I had seen by what paroxysms of wrath Caligula could be swayed. He was now distinctly stronger, though his wound still remained unhealed. It had occurred to me that some drug might be shot through a syringe between the lips of this wound, productive to the monster of a rageful state like

that which I had but lately observed in him. Past doubt he was by nature replete with ruinous instincts. The well-fed condition in which Angus had thus far kept him, combined with a docility and cleverness rare among his race, most probably explained his previous clement ways. Chemist though I was, I found intense difficulty in resolving upon any special drug which I might use with the least surety as to its effect. In my mind I reviewed at least a score of them, but all failed to convince me of their desired poignance and efficacy. My boldness was now greater than ever before. It had in it no factor of temerity, but a very decided one of self-confidence. I determined to make an experiment upon Caligula with an injection of simple alcohol. Just the small syringe which I wanted for this purpose I obtained one day in a walk among the shops of the neighbouring village. My opportunity for the trial I contemplated was ampler than might be supposed. Angus allowed his servants to enter the "serpentorium" and its adjacent biding-place of Caligula not oftener than twice a day. For hours quiet would reign quite unmolested throughout all this portion of the house. If Angus was not there, or in the cozy chamber adjoining these two others, no one else save myself was likely to break the stillness. And since the partial recovery of his curious charmer, Angus had frequently spent long intervals upstairs in his own private apartments. His delicate system had suffered from the sharp jar of recent catastrophes, and the least among these had probably by no means been the python's illness. In any case, insomnia had recently attacked him, and with it the nervous exhaustion so apt to follow. It was understood that I could occupy the small sitting-room, and read there in front of the fire whenever I felt thus disposed; and so, one morning, while all my encompassments were very silent, I slipped into the hot little enclosure where Caligula lay passive. He showed no heed of my approach. I had noted this same unconcern of late when Angus had drawn near him. The wound was plainly visible, a dull-tinted gape of bloodless tissue, like that which might have been made in the body of a fish.

I stooped over it and inserted the point of my syringe with extreme gentleness. Then, sure of my power to escape before the mammoth could uncoil himself, I injected the alcohol with firm and dexterous hands.

To my surprise Caligula remained perfectly immobile. I waited for nearly ten minutes, and then tried the same plan once more, with like neutral results. "It is the slow circulation of all the serpent tribes," I concluded. "Possibly this dormant state may change hereafter." Not far away from the snake was a big bowl of milk, and I remembered that Angus had recently told me of how his grim friend had partaken copiously of this nourishment, disdaining all other. I had in my pocket a flask which contained more than a pint of pure alcohol, and now occurred to me the idea of pouring this liquor into the milk. This I presently did. There was, of course, a strong chance that when Caligula again desired to drink he would treat the milk with dainty scorn. But at least I could seek to augment, as it were, the possibilities of my own success.

To my surprise and keen interest he soon began to uncoil himself, and with that indescribably beautiful sinuosity which repelled while it allured, he began to move toward the milk-bowl. Evidently my injection had produced in him both strength and appetite. Would he refuse the milk however? I recollected having long ago read somewhere that snakes did not drink at all, and repeating this to Angus, who scoffed at the idea that many of them were not inordinately fond of milk. But there now seemed to me every chance that Caligula would turn in disgust from the alcoholised potion. If he should really quaff it there was good reason to expect that he would undergo some excessive disturbance, for the stimulant given him subcutaneously had already asserted itself in marked manner.

At length his lean, solid head hovered over the bowl. Then, with a delicately dipping motion, it descended, and soon was immersed an inch or so in the pale fluid. There was no abrupt starting back, such as I had expected, but presently there was a gradual withdrawal followed by a still loftier ascent of the head than before, and a sweeping oscilla-

tion of it which for all the world resembled the dainty deliberateness of some veteran wine-taster, dubious on the point of whether what he had just tasted was a product of this particular vintage or that.

Narrowly vigilant, prepared for an emergency, I stood near the threshold of the door by which I had entered this drowsy monarch's abode. Drowsy he no longer showed himself; for indeed, in a few seconds more, he stooped again and drank (though with considerable slowness) the entire contents of the bowl.

I receded still further, and watched him with great attention. His draught ended, he moved away from the empty vessel in undulations of the most noble and vigorous kind. His bare, branchy tree, in the centre of the room, had not tempted him (as Angus had but yesterday mournfully informed me) since the infliction of the enfeebling dagger-stroke. But he now approached it with a calm energy that implied new and vital impetus. For several moments he paused, regarding it, at least one quarter of his prodigious body raised in this act of kingly contemplation. For the first, and doubtless for the last time in my life, I beheld in its full splendour of power a monstrous boa behave precisely as thousands of his kin are forever doing in the haunts of their own tropic forests. He poised himself as easily for his designed leap as though he had been some tiny grass-snake that one sees glide among the hedges of our English meadows. For a second he drew backward those yards of litheness and suppleness which he had already reared, and this new posture was one of lordly surety and equipoise, fascinating in its way as the haughty defiance of some uniquely lovely woman. The folds of his body left upon the floor had rounded themselves into circles of perfect symmetry, and each circle palpably shook as with an electric ardour, the tapering tail which terminated them having in its quick quivers an eager, prehensile prophecy of the spring which would shortly ensue. And when he made the spring, when he shot up into the tree and entwined himself there, his facile blending of bulk and nimbleness, of enormity and momentum, almost

struck me dumb with admiration. I stood for an instant as intoxicated as I hoped that he was. A vision of the vast Brazilian forests passed before me, where these quaint and terrific engines of natural force swooped with half their strong-thewed lengths down from mighty trees on the prey that chanced to wander below them. Loathsomeness and harmony and sublimity all in one, Caligula gave me for a brief while strange dreams of the lonely, mysterious, virgin climes where for ages his ancestors had thriven. But remembering what I had sought to do and wherefore, I glanced at my watch, perceived that it was nearly time for luncheon, and hence for the wakening and presence downstairs of Angus. Closing the door of the chamber, I left Caligula wound about his artificial tree, revivified and subtly vibrant through all his massive yet limber length.

When, perhaps a quarter of an hour later, Angus entered the sitting-room whither I had repaired, he found me seated before the fire with a book.

"You're going to take a look at your convalescent?" I said, carelessly, as he passed me on his way toward the "serpentorium."

"Yes—naturally, since I haven't seen him for over two hours."

"You'll go before lunch, then?" came my rather absent words, as I glanced at him from my open book across one shoulder. "I believe it's already served."

"I'll join you in the dining-room soon," he answered, and he was about disappearing as I said, with an air of having suddenly recalled something:

"Oh, by the way, Angus. You'll find your beloved Caligula a good deal better."

"Better? You don't mean it?" he exclaimed. "Have you paid him a visit, then, Harold? I thought you held him in too great abhorrence to venture near him alone."

"I opened the door a little while ago and got a glimpse of him. To my surprise I saw he had drank up all his milk—"

"Really!" struck in Angus, with a delighted tone.

"—And that he'd mounted into his tree, enwreathing it with signs of rather solid enjoyment."

"Ah, what welcome news!" burst from my cousin. He flurriedly turned the knob of the door and at once vanished.

I sat there by the fire, quite motionless, with the book fallen upon my lap. Now, I asked myself, *what might possibly occur?* Of course the snake, hitherto so ductile and kindly, might extend simply the most harmless greeting. But I had already noted the rashly familiar caresses of his owner. What if these roused still more in him that very spirit of savagery which I could not help fancying that I had lately enkindled? Who could tell just how far the fiery element which I had added to his dull, slow blood-beats might alter him from lenity to mutiny? Had I not seen but a fortnight ago the rabid transport which had seized him without a sign of warning? Why then was it not more than merely credible that such predisposition to wrathful fits might aid the working of the alcohol and engird Angus with death before he had dreamed of his own anger?

I waited in keen suspense for a number of minutes. No sound as yet left the room whither Angus had gone, separated from this by a small passage-way and by the "serpentorium," lying still beyond. If he cried out I was nearly certain that I could hear him, for the door leading into the passage-way was ajar, and all that annexed part of the building was of much lighter structure than the real Cleeve Lodge itself. Rising, as a thought struck me, I shut the heavy oaken door which commanded the main portion of the house.

Just as I finished doing this, a low cry reached me. And low as it was, the tone of it had for my ears the most pungent meaning. I hurried into the passage-way. The cry was repeated, but even there it came comparatively faint. Then I passed through the abode of the lesser snakes, in their rows of glass cases. The door of Caligula's room had been left half unclosed. I paused a few feet from it, listening once more.

"*Harold—oh, my God—come!—come!*"

These words were just audible, and barely even that. I felt that a half-strangled throat was trying to shriek them. Somehow a memory of Blanche's death here darted through my brain. I pushed forward, perfectly composed, and planted myself in the doorway.

My elixir had been the right one, after all. Of the many drugs that I had gone over in my mind, this had been luckily selected. Caligula had no doubt received from his master overtures of so affectionate a sort that he chose to resent them. And how? A struggling shape told, overlapped by ligatures in whose every sentient foot was agonizing pressure. Angus reeled and fell while I stood and watched him. His assailant was merciless; this time there was only the intent to slay, as if he had been rabbit or dog. As he toppled over in this inflexible embrace, which I knew myself to have engendered, his eyes, glaring and filled with an unparalleled wildness of fear, met my own. He tried to address me, but merely a line of foam filmed his lips. And even into the anguish of the look which he gave me I saw creep such hint of rebuke, discovery, accusation, as might have haunted any man with an atom of conscience for half a century of his after life. The strained eyeballs uttered, if I may say so, a silent tirade of reproach. "You stand there and will not help me," they seemed to speak, "because you are glad that I am dying like this."

Then the lids fell over them. Caligula was frightfully in earnest. Quite soon I heard a sound like dice thrown on a slab of stone. It was Angus's bones cracking. In another second or so his tongue protruded, and therewith gushed a red stream from between the victim's wide-parted lips. Angus's body perceptibly diminished before my gaze. His shoulders met, doubled together as if he had been a shape of paper. One arm lay outside an interspace in the belts of slaughterous tension that bound him, with its fragile white hand fallen effete, like a pale curled feather.

The end had come; there could not be a doubt of this. Now it was my time to act. And act I certainly did, with a force and skill that surprised myself. Slipping back into the pleasant and cosy little room where Angus had for the

last time in his life exchanged speech with me, I stood there a few seconds, noting that it was vacant and still, just as I had left it. Then I made a great, horrified shout break from my lips. After that, I dashed toward the closed door which led into a hall joined to another, larger and more central. Off this latter hall was the dining-room. I hurried into it, and as I did so repeated my desperate appeal. A servant stood there, near the table spread for luncheon.

I rushed to him and poured forth sentence after sentence with the maddest impetuosity, all the time being inwardly as tranquil as if I were telling him that the cutlets looked a trifle underdone. I even thought of my colour while I clutched the man's arm and implored him to summon his fellows ; ought I not to appear more chalky of cheek, and was there a chance that I might not strike him as properly pallid, properly distraught and demoralised of mien ?

It took some time to rouse the household, and when roused their abject horror tempted my secret mirth. Meanwhile I kept imploring for a gun, or some weapon that resembled it. Angus had never dreamed of being a sportsman, nor had his father before him. Still, in a locked closet upstairs there were weapons, and at last one of the servants, bolder and calmer than the rest, put into my hands a ponderous old-fashioned pistol, which he told me had possibly been loaded for a good while past.

"Thank God !" I cried, seizing the clumsy thing from his grasp. "I'll use it if it kills me !"

These words had a rather heroic ring in my own ears, as I now darted to the chamber where I was certain that Angus lay dead ; but I had no suspicion of how dismally I was destined to recall my own valiant avowal.

The man followed me. Caligula, as we entered his little domain, was about unwinding himself from his prostrate prey. I pointed my pistol at his big, erect, swaying head, and fired. The bullet was one of those antique slugs which are sometimes found in such long-barrelled pieces as this I carried. I am sure that my aim was good, but the wretchedness of the weapon made it fly wide of the mark. Instantly I fired again, and this second bullet flew indeed still wider of

the mark, for there came on me a sudden stunned, stinging feeling in the right side of my head near the temple. This was quickly followed by a sensation of deadly faintness, which ended in a total blank.

The second barrel of the old pistol had exploded in my hand, and a fragment of it had struck me.

I knew nothing, they told me, for nearly an hour. When I awoke I found myself lying in my own chamber upstairs. The light had been made dim there, but I recognised the servant who alone of all the cowardly household had been brave enough to go with me into Caligula's quarters.

"It's you, Spalding?" I said, in a voice which I could not raise above a whisper.

"Yes, sir."

"Of course Mr. Mountstuart was killed?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

I saw, at this point, a tall, slender man slip through the dusk past Spalding, and raise a finger warningly to the servant as he paused at my bedside.

I understood the gesture, and surmised that it was made by some newly-summoned physician. But it did not restrain me. I felt excessively feeble, but wholly fearless. It seemed to me that death must be quite close, but this belief brought not a shade of dread with it. A kind of drowsy and yet obstinate curiosity, however, caused me to persist in asking:

"And the snake? Has *he* been killed?"

"Oh, yes, sir," came again the voice of Spalding.

"By whom?"

"Yourself, sir. That second barrel of your pistol exploded, but its bullet went straight through the snake's head."

"Ah! really?" I remember murmuring, and then a pain like that of a frightful dagger-stroke shot through my left temple, and once again all consciousness left me.

CHAPTER XIX.

I HAD no knowledge of my real condition for a period of about twelve days. My skull had been fractured quite near the temple—so near, in fact, that it was marvellous how I lived at all, especially because of the fact that I was surrounded by a lot of alarmed and rather ignorant servants, and attended by a provincial doctor whose knowledge of his craft was in my case piteously meagre. Perhaps nothing saved me but the arrival of John Maurayne, the family solicitor, who did not reach Cleeve Lodge until I had lain ill two days. Then, as I was afterward informed, a famous surgeon came down from London and saved me by removing a tiny splinter of bone which was pressing against the brain. He departed before I had the opportunity of seeing him. Of course, when I became myself again, the funeral of Angus had occurred, and hence the general clamour consequent on his death was happily lost for me. But I gradually reawakened to the idea that I was a sort of newspaper hero. As I now recall my first sensations of entity, of individuality, the perfume of flowers indissolubly joins this reminiscence. People from far and near had sent me these odorous tributes. Most probably the serving-man, Spalding, had babbled in complimentary terms of my "bravery" and my "self-forgetfulness." Angus had been unpopular throughout the county, for reasons which I need not denote. My accredited attempt to rescue him from the toils of Caligula had taken for the popular mind colours of handsomest heroism, because of the death-wound which I had so narrowly escaped, and which was believed, for several days, to be a mortal infliction. And so it happened that instead of risking loud execration I unintentionally clad myself with a most flattering notoriety. Not until my actual convalescence was I permitted to see a single visitor, and then, almost by droves, well-wishers besieged my chamber. Many of these gratulatory pilgrims I was not permitted to meet. Others, who entered my presence, deluged me with praises and commiserations. My "noble behaviour" was productive of untold

plaudits. The village physician, whom Maurayne now thought quite capable of watching over my recovery—a timid-voiced young gentleman whose intellect was, perhaps, just as tenuous as his body, though surely not so aspiring—at length relieved my mind of a great dread, while at the same time he set my nerves (even debilitated as they were) most unaccustomedly a-tingle.

"You raved a good deal, Mr. Mountstuart," he said, in answer to a question that I had put to him. "At times you were quite incoherent, and then both the hired nurse and myself understood them. Mr. Maurayne heard some of them, too, and caught their meaning. You know he has been making occasional trips down here from London ever since you were first hurt and Mr. Angus Mountstuart was so unhappily killed. As of course you're aware, Mr. Maurayne is the family solicitor, and as the fact of your cousin having died intestate leaves everything to his sister, Miss Olive Mountstuart, now in Canada, Mr. Maurayne wanted at the first practical moment to consult with you——"

"Mr. Maurayne and I had a talk yesterday afternoon," I coldly interposed, giving the fringy rim of the shawl that swathed me in my invalid's chair an impatient toss. "Never mind, please, about Miss Olive and her being heiress of the entire estates. You were speaking of my delirious rant. Was—er—was it ever *very* coherent?"

The doctor laughed. "Oh, no. At one time—your *sanest* time, if I may use the term—you declared yourself the murderer——" But here my companion paused, lifting both hands and waving them before his face. "My dear Mr. Mountstuart," he resumed, "*please* don't ask me to rehearse the wild babble of a man in a state of dangerous cerebral congestion!"

"I do ask you," came my persistent response. "I—er—called myself a murderer, you say, Dr. Abbott?"

"Oh, you said that you'd killed every one of your relations who have died so recently. You insisted that you had injected the saliva of a mad dog—think of it!—into the veins of your uncle, Mr. Malcolm Mountstuart. You

declared that you had lured your uncle Cecil into a dark wood at night and shot him. You would have it that you had burned your cousin Blanche to death by setting fire to the draperies of her bed. And so on, Mr. Mountstuart. Of course we were often amused by these astonishing statements ; they did seem *so* ridiculous ! But please be certain, sir, that their few auditors have never dreamed of repeating them."

"Naturally," I said, smiling. "Such nonsense could not be worth repetition."

But for some time afterward I thrilled from the effects of these tidings. "Ah, delirium," I thought, "thou picker of locks, how can the shrewdest of us resist thy species of crafty housebreaking ! " But surely I had been lucky to babble this hodge-podge of truth and falsehood, instead of uttering truth simple and plain ! Here once more was the intervention of destiny. I, who believed in nothing, as all the religionists would have told me, had cogent cause to believe at least in that !

As I grew better, while the latter days of winter began mellowing into the early days of spring, I found myself reviewing my past severe illness and brooding with much intellectual zest upon certain hours when I had scarcely a doubt that I was dying. These hours were not at all confined to a special period, for I had had several relapses, and certainly three separate times the intensity of my disorder had told me that I hovered between life and death. But whenever the conviction had grasped me that perhaps I might shortly cease to breathe, I had always maintained a perfect mental coolness.

We so often hear of the horrors that group about the bed of a dying murderer. Here was I, a murderer of sixfold atrocity, and yet my faith in the annihilation of what is called spirit never for an instant wavered. I had no dread of punishment beyond the grave. I stood, before my own mortal intelligence, the test of my previous tenets. I was, in other words, when confronted by imminent dissolution, precisely the consistent atheist that I had been while in thorough health. And this development, virtually final,

only serves to corroborate, I should say, the position which I had always previously preserved with regard to my special case as an unexampled modern miscreant.

Radicalism, the march of science, the destruction of that orthodoxy which deduces all human virtue from a single divine source and not from the slow progress of base types towards higher ones, had proved in my case the producer of complete moral ruin. I know that I have written all this before in my present chronicle of crime, but I deliberately write it again, as one gives half-a-dozen blows of the hammer instead of three or four to the nail which he wishes durably driven in. Grandiloquent though it may sound, I assert myself one of those mutilated creatures whom the chariot-wheels of all change inevitably crush. Not in excuse, not in extenuation, is this fact thus reaffirmed. And its expression in no way hints at the futility of radical social struggles. To tunnel a mountain, to build a new railway through a valley, to turn the course of a river from its natural bed, may be actions fraught with the spirit of a most bountiful reform. But by the accomplishment of these results animal life is forced to perish, and sometimes to an extent cruelly prodigal. Morally I had been made to perish like this. What millions of my fellow-men may perhaps be able to call their gain hereafter, I had been fated to find the most miserable loss. The pages of new experience which still remain for me to record must only confirm, I should say, what I have already declared. For the spiritual re-birth which awaited me was like a shaft of sunlight that strives to pierce through some mud-clouded forest spring. I was one of those minds and temperaments which conservatism nurtures, which mutation destroys. In my shattered state the summons of the one master-feeling came to me, and at its bidding I rose like some trampled and blood-stained creature, to beat the inexorable air with maimed hands.

Meanwhile these last days of my recovery had left me ambitious, obdurate and callous as ever before. I longed now to take the ultimate step in my iniquitous career, and it was pleasure beyond speech to find that wise and grave old John Maurayne, the family solicitor, counselled a journey

to Canada as soon as my regained health should permit me to make it. "Then you have not written to Olive in Montreal?" I said.

"No."

"She still is ignorant of——?"

"Her brother's death; yes." John Maurayne, grey, dignified, with a look on his decorous and wrinkled face which seemed to hint that he was hiding behind sober reticence many a household secret, toyed with a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses while he proceeded: "I thought it best to keep from her, for the present, my dear Harold, this last shocking calamity."

"But you tell me that she inherits everything."

"True. Everything goes to her now, without reservation. And yet to inform her by letter even that she has lately become a great heiress must be to accompany the tidings with others of an agonising sort. I knew Olive well, here in her father's home. She has a nature as sensitive as it is noble. Never have I met a young girl at once so winsome of person and of character so high and pure. To know that she now possessed a large fortune would mean little to her; this third blow dealt her immediate kindred would mean an unspeakable amount. Your uncle and Edna and Angus may all have been loveless enough, but the bond of blood which bound her to them Olive held sweetly sacred. I think, Harold, that it would be far better if you consented to break to her in person this momentous news. Dr. Abbott has already told me that in a fortnight or so the voyage will be just what you will need in order to put a finishing stamp on your cure. I can't manage to go with you; I only wish it were otherwise. But there is no one whom I would so gladly intrust as yourself with a mission that will require sympathy, tenderness, and tact."

This whole idea of crossing over to Canada was now daily growing more agreeable. "It would surely give me a sort of melancholy pleasure, my dear Mr. Maurayne——" I began, and there I stopped. "But one most important matter," I added, "has escaped your memory."

"And that is, Harold——?"

"The newspapers."

"You mean that those in Montreal will have copied from English ones the strange account of poor Angus's death?"

"Yes."

"I had thought of that, my boy. And yet if the story should reach Olive in this way it would be your task to try and heal her wound instead of inflicting one. But there is a strong chance that the story may not reach them before you do. Mrs. Elphinstone is a widow, you know, and although a woman of somewhat fashionable life, it might easily happen that she was intimate with nobody who scanned the journals of the day closely enough to call her attention to the record of Angus's death. Montreal is not New York, or Boston, or Chicago, or any such actively live city as these. Besides, I recall that Olive's father has told me of how Mrs. Elphinstone always goes to her country seat near Niagara early in the spring. She may have changed her quarters already, and if so, then her own and Olive's knowledge of the sad accident might be far less probable. Provided the truth *has* reached Olive, she will of course write soon."

But no letter came from Olive during the next fortnight, and at the end of this time I was not only quite restored in health, but had engaged my passage to Canada. I sailed from Liverpool just eighteen days after my recorded interview with Maurayne. Never in my life had I felt more physically well than now.

Indeed, a kind of gloriously evil exhilaration possessed me. I felt that the terminus of a toilful and most daring journey was now soon to be reached. I had the same glow of exultant pride (or thus perhaps I may merely have fancied) which warms the veins of some righteous victor after he has almost overcome the last obstacle between high-minded effort and canonising conquest.

The intended killing of Olive offered for me no anxious omens. Conversely I found myself longing to survey this new field for the exercise of my refreshed ingenuity as assassin. The danger through which I had passed in perfect safety did not simply embolden me, it clad my

homicidal spirit with a curious dignity of self-esteem. It promoted me, as one might say, from a plotting lieutenancy of sin to a doughty, if demon-like, captaincy. I had won my brutal brevet; I had become an adept in the black art of slaying. What could be more quietly superb than my success as it now stood—a very tower of moral insult to my race, looming above myriads of lesser criminal accomplishments? With what matchless adroitness had I managed to bring about the death of six fellow-creatures (not counting Miss Ramsdell, who made an undoubted seventh), and yet abide not only in a state of soilless repute before society, but in one of actual honour and prestige!

The voyage from Liverpool to Quebec proved stormy and unpleasant, as such voyages usually are. But my enjoyment of it was for the most part keen. When sea-sickness gripped me the attacks were brief and only in fiercest weather, leaving me stronger and clearer-brained after an hour or two of sharp discomfort. The ocean spoke to me with the same splendid melancholy which I had heard it use while hearkening its rhythms from the Devonshire cliffs. Never more absolutely than now did I affirm to myself that the meaning of all earthly life was nothingness; never more absolutely than now did I determine that I would be the idolator of my own egotistic greeds until extinction should lap me in its eternal sleep. I was still youthful, with both intellect and senses eager for the enjoyment which they knew how and where to seek. The fine flower of existence still waited my plucking. And when I had bruised its perfumed petals against my nostrils and felt its honey sweeten my lips, then all I had to do was to toss it away and follow its fragrance and savour into that oblivion which has neither gleams nor glooms, neither echoes nor silences.

My first glimpses of the Western world filled me with glad surprise. I would have lingered several days in quaint Quebec if it had not been for the urgency of my desire to find out whether Olive were still in Montreal. Thither I soon journeyed, and found that the handsome and spacious residence of Mrs. Elphinstone had been closed for the

season. An old servant, left in charge, told me that her mistress, with "Miss Roberta" (presumably the adopted niece, Roberta Sterling) and Miss Olive Mountstuart, had departed for the country over a week ago. "The country" was in this case a noteworthy distance away. It took me several hours to reach Pineland, the residence of Mrs. Elphinstone. This wild and beautiful estate literally overhung the Niagara River at one of those precipitous parts of its banks between the rapids that underlie the Falls and the city of Lewiston. That portion of the domain which really verged upon the abyss overlooking the river was hardly more than two hundred feet in length. A grand forest of colossal pine-trees led to it, and the murmur of their branches, if the wind favoured, would often blend with the roar of the most glorious cascade that the face of our planet holds.

These facts I, of course, did not know as I sat in a charming room, one cold, brilliant afternoon of middle May, and told Mrs. Elphinstone both who I was and wherefore I had come. But to glance through the early fire-lit dusk past a broad window that gave upon the lawns outside was to see the dark pillar-like trunks of these majestic trees tower from trim green levels of sward, and beyond, at end of their lofty arcades, to catch flashes of the white-crested rapids.

Mrs. Elphinstone had come to greet me, and she alone. I recalled Uncle Cecil's wife rather vaguely, but she did not seem at all to resemble this lady, whose image glimmered in my memory as that of a pale and languid person. Mrs. Elphinstone was neither pale nor languid; she was ruddy and vivacious, with a pair of merry-twinkling eyes and a pair of lips that seemed to have got little wrinkles in the corners from the simple cause of their having permitted themselves a prodigality of smiles. It occurred to me, as I watched her, that I had rarely seen a woman of more typically amiable manner. To deny that a most sunny soul underlay this genial exterior would have been like saying that some rose, viewed at a distance, was possibly odourless.

And yet I soon wrought upon Mrs. Elphinstone the effect of glooming all her native brightness.

"It is so horrible!" she faltered, with a throb in her mellow voice that made you feel as if you were hearing some bird try to sadden its jubilant carol. And oddly enough I now for the first time observed that she was clad in a kind of half-mourning, doubtless tributary to her brother-in-law and Edna. "As I told you, Mr. Mountstuart," she proceeded, flurriedly and with the air of being shocked out of all her sweet, wholesome grooves of hospitality, "Olive and my niece Roberta have gone out for a walk this afternoon. They will soon return. They are not far away—merely wandering about the grounds, you know. And when Olive returns—— Oh, it will be too dreadful, will it not?"

Here Mrs. Elphinstone burst into tears, and I rose and wiped her brimming eyes with her own kerchief. I knew these gracious little arts perfectly, and deported myself now with a delicacy and ardour simulated just adroitly enough to make my companion clasp the hand which I had let lightly rest upon her plump neck.

"I won't call you anything but Harold!" she said, with breaking voice. "I've heard Olive speak of you so often, and always with such affection! She told me you were both handsome and good. I can see the first quality, and Heaven knows your gentle and tender way of informing me that this new calamity has come to her race makes me realise that her second judgment of you was a wise one!"

"I had hoped and yet not hoped, dear Mrs. Elphinstone," came my murmurous and feeling answer, "that the newspapers of your land here might have anticipated me in my present tidings. That is, while dreading the new blow to Olive, I had longed to find her at least in a measure prepared for it."

My hearer nodded, and then shook her head sorrowfully. "No—no; we never saw the account of it in the newspapers. No doubt we should have heard about its being there even if we had not read it, but for the very great quiet of our Montreal life last winter. Olive would go nowhere; she may not have cared much for her dead sister, and Heaven knows she had little reason to care, considering

Edna's distressing persecutions. But she was loyal to her race. *Bon chien* . . . you know the old French proverb. And she suffered, did poor Olive, for the loss of her father. She loved her father in spite of all his coldness and hardness. And now this news about Angus! It will affect her fearfully. Not that Angus—— But never mind *that!* You know; you understand. It can't be as if she had lost a brother who really was *like* a brother. And yet it will be very severe for her—rackingly severe."

It was. In a little while Olive came into the room, followed by her friend. The servants outside had evidently told her something; she knew that I had come.

I put forth my hand, but she seemed scarcely to see it, and instead of taking it flung both arms about my neck, pressing her lips to my cheek. I remember their touch so well! It was chill as if with the sweet northern spring air out-of-doors, and yet warm as if with the glow of her girlish young blood.

I returned the kiss, flushing with a strange self-wonderment, and then, as she unwound her arms and slightly receded from me, I caught both her hands and stared into her face.

How enchantingly these few past months had changed her! She still was the Olive I had liked and admired, but what freshened lustre of loveliness lived in every feature! Despite certain peculiar graces (that strange-streaked hair of hers, for example, too brown to be golden and too golden to be brown), one could never have claimed for her that she was exceptionally fair. The mobile and riant mouth was perhaps a hint too large, and though the modelling of throat and chin was perfection, it contrasted ill, no doubt, with the width apart of the shining, purplish black eyes and the broad, almost unfeminine brows. I somehow seemed to see in her face a blending of intellectual power and emotional feeling whose interfusion at once baffled and charmed. It will be remembered that I had expected her to grow handsome, but she had grown so in such an amazingly different way from that which I had foreseen!

"Harold, Harold! I'm so glad to meet you again! You

bring such a welcome breath of dear old England! But why did you not write to tell me that you *were* coming? You never said a word about it in that sad but delightful letter you sent me some time ago. Or why did not Angus write me? Do say at once if he is quite well!"

These words brought me at once to myself. I slowly released her hands and looked at Mrs. Elphinstone. (As though forgotten, which she indeed was, Miss Sterling stood quietly in the background.)

After a little while I had told her all. The tidings produced, as it seemed to me, more of terror than of grief. She made me repeat several times the story of Angus's death. Meanwhile the twilight deepened outside, and the red embers of the wood-fire took a ruby keenness. Our own faces looked vague to us in the big, shadowy room. We were all seated. Miss Sterling sat a good distance off, with her back to that same window whence I had first seen the bluish crystal of the gloaming between the dark, columnar pine-trunks. The young woman's face and figure made simply a black silhouette to my sight, and yet I somehow had got to think that she was watching me very intently.

"I believe there is a doom hanging over our whole race!" Olive cried, softly but passionately. "And Harold, think! All are gone, now, except you and myself."

"All, my poor Olive!" I answered, huskily. "This is but too true!"

Mrs. Elphinstone glided over to Olive and sank into a chair at her side. Then the head of the younger woman drooped forward and fell upon the bosom of the elder. Presently there were the sounds of sobs. I wondered if any thought of her inheritance had crossed my cousin's mind. "No," I decided; "she is too completely unselfish for that."

Lights were soon brought, and as their beams began to fill the room Miss Sterling came over and joined me. For the first time I now saw her heedingly and well. She had a neat, flexible figure. She was not pretty, but she had a dark face full of delicate distinction. Her hair was dead-black and straight as an Indian's, and her eyes, which were

night itself in hue, harboured both poignancy and dreaminess; they were the eyes of one who can think and also act. Her manner lacked softness, though it implied sincerity—perhaps a very great deal of sincerity. The tones of her voice and the accent she placed upon her words had a most unfamiliar ring. They did not strike me as American, and yet I felt them to be quite un-English. But already I had grown a trifle used to the Canadian mode of speech, and soon I again recognised it in her. Altogether I rather promptly disliked her. The blunt and even brusque directness with which she addressed me might have hidden a heart of gold, as people phrase it; and with my extraordinary acumen in the reading of character I did not doubt that this was true. But how much did I care for a heart of gold? What I had set myself to obtain was many capacious coffers of it.

By a curious effect of prescience, while I here looked suavely into the clean-cut and sedate face before me, this sentence, almost as if my own voice had audibly uttered it, seemed to break the somewhat awkward silence that now ensued: "Unless I am very much in error it is fated, my dear Miss Roberta Sterling, *that you and I shall be enemies.*"

CHAPTER XX.

Of course this reflection of mine had preceded the first words pronounced by Olive's friend. They were delivered with a self-contained security so novel to me in a maiden of her evident youthfulness that I could scarcely restrain a surprised start.

"You've certainly come on a most mournful errand, Mr. Mountstuart. Poor Olive, there, is crying her eyes out on my aunt's shoulder, as you see. It proves her lovely disposition that she should feel the faintest regret at his death. He never treated her much more decently than her sister Edna did, and that's saying a very great deal. You see, I know all about it. Olive's told me everything. Not that she complained. It's in her to endure, not to complain.

She'd have gone back to England when her father died, if it hadn't been for me. I kept persuading her to stay here. And I did just the same when the news reached us about Edna. Aunt Lilian—Mrs. Elphinstone, there—had her nays and yeas, her decisions and her indecisions. But I settled matters. I'm not amiable, like dear, sweet Aunt Lilian, and I'm not as forgiving, by numberless degrees, as Olive is."

"You appear to have great influence, then, over Olive."

"Hush!" reprimanded Roberta Sterling, with an upward motion of her forefinger. "Don't speak so loudly. Make your voice like mine. Let Olive cry; it will do her good. They're not tears of grief. I dare say she'll eat some dinner in a little while. Of course, there's the shock. But she'll recover soon enough. Why shouldn't she? Caring for this horrible snake just showed what her brother was. I got it out of her, one day, that he often snubbed her for a whole private museumful of ghastly, wriggling things, and sometimes wouldn't answer the commonest question she put to him, but would go and chatter all sorts of affectionate twaddle to the inmates of his 'serpentorium,' as he idiotically called it."

"Your information is most probably true," I assented, rather colourlessly.

"True! Of course it's true. And now Olive has come into the whole big estate, hasn't she? You've not said a word on *that* subject, I've noticed."

These last sentences fairly stabbed me by their cool vulgarity. And yet I should not wish to pronounce Roberta Sterling a vulgar girl.

"I refrained from mentioning the matter of Olive's inheritance," came my slow reply. "It seemed to me, Miss Sterling, that the time was ill-suited to any such rather material disclosure."

"Oh, yes; I don't doubt you're right," she whisperingly rattled on. "But she *has* got everything, has she not?"

"Everything."

"I'm glad, and I'm sorry. It will be delightful to go

to England, but I feel certain I shall never enjoy living there."

"But *you* need not live there because Olive does."

"Need I not?" she returned, with short pertness; and then a strange look vested the lower part of her firm-lined face—a look, as it struck me, of the most indomitable resolve. "I shall always live wherever Olive lives."

"Always?" I smiled. "That's a large word for so young a mouth as yours."

"Till one of us dies, then—if you like that form of phrasing better."

"But if one of you marries?"

"I shall never marry."

"Many a girl of your age says so."

"Oh, I know it. But I'm not at all like other girls of my age. When you're better acquainted with me you'll perceive it."

"In a measure, perhaps, I perceive it now, Miss Sterling. But then there is Olive to be reckoned with. What if *she* marries?"

"Olive may of course marry, Mr. Mountstuart. I foresee that. But she and I will never separate—never! It is understood. Ah, I read your thought," she broke off. "You mean that my statement is only born of a school-girlish sentiment which will fade in a few more years. Ah, how wrong you are! The friendship between Olive and myself is a sweet, holy, ideal passion."

"Which is another way of stating," I answered, with irrepressible satire, "that any one who marries Olive will have to marry you both."

"Ah, you're cruel!" she replied, her eyes never for an instant quitting my face, in their deliberate, uncivil scrutiny. "I mean that I love her so devotedly that I shall be everything to her hereafter—everything, that is, which her future husband may *not* be."

"But suppose this future husband leaves nothing for you to be, as you express it?"

"Then there will always remain for me devotion—companionship."

"Charming, I admit. But husbands often have odd notions. What if Olive's were to resent your adherence, picturesque though it might prove?"

She threw her head back, with a smile of ice on the thin red-threaded curve of her lips. "I'd make him regret it if he did!"

"But, my dear young lady," I began, "do you know what you are saying?" And then I changed my tone. "It's impossible, however, to take you seriously, and you will not take yourself so after you've got fuller into your twenties."

I rose, as I thus spoke, for the sobs of Olive had ceased, and she had lifted her head from the benign shoulder of her aunt.

"Oh, I take myself with a very great seriousness," came Roberta Sterling's answer. But I pretended not to hear it; I had drawn near Olive, who quitted her chair at my approach. Aside I was soon saying to Mrs. Elphinstone: "What will you think of my swooping down upon you in this unceremonious way? But it is only for a night. I have left my luggage and my servant at the best hotel I could find in the neighbourhood, and to-morrow I shall journey southward after having had a glimpse of the wondrous Falls."

Her answer was precisely what I had foreseen. "Leave us to-morrow! What are you saying? Let me send for your luggage at once."

My sojourn in this delightful dwelling thenceforth grew indefinitely fixed. Naturally enough, Olive's depression soon cleared. She was full of such intrinsic good spirits that the mourning gown in which I had from the first seen her clad, ill became her bright looks and uncurbable smiles. And yet the dusk of her draperies became to perfection her half-blond beauty.

In a day or two it had broken upon me that Pineland was by no means a retired estate. Other gentlefolk besides Mrs. Elphinstone and her two nieces dwelt in country seats not far away. They formed a blithe little society among themselves, and while still anxious that my cousin should

join them in their drives, walks and tennis-playing, all revealed the nicest sympathy with her shadowed social fortunes.

"I do so hope you will not think Olive heartless in going about with these kindly acquaintances now and then," Mrs. Elphinstone one day said to me. "It can't have escaped you that my darling is deeply touched by what has happened in England."

"Olive could not behave heartlessly if she tried, Mrs. Elphinstone," was my answer. "I understand the adoration of Miss Sterling."

My listener's face beamed with smiles. "Roberta's feeling *is* adoration; you're quite right."

"It's a trifle tyrannical, is it not?"

"Yes; amusingly so."

"Never tiringly so, my dear Mrs. Elphinstone?" I asked.

The genial lady started, and then gave me a glance of grave reproach. "Roberta," she said, slowly and measuredly, "was an orphan when she came under my care. She had never known the richer and sweeter parental love. I became her mother, as it were, and that void in her heart which should have been filled by a love, sisterly or fraternal, waited the coming of Olive. Perhaps this waiting has made her love for Olive all the more intense."

"It is certainly very intense."

"She has unburdened herself to you, then?"

"She has been most amply confidential."

"I see, my dear Harold. She has told you a lot of poetic nonsense."

"She asserts herself sworn to perpetual maidenhood."

"Yes. I've heard that airy absurdity."

"And she insists that she will always cling to Olive after the marriage of that dear girl."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed my companion. "I've heard her say just such astonishing things."

"And you've thought them a little impracticable?"

"My *dear* Harold! Sometimes, if you'll permit me to tell you so, you strike me, with all your intelligence and with all your perfect apparent knowledge of the world, as curiously—innocent."

I am certain that I looked very demure as I answered: "Possibly you're right, dear lady. It *may* be that Miss Roberta will herself marry, and so partially forget the present acute fervours of her attachment for Olive. Surely it would not be a very enjoyable experience for any future husband of Olive if he found himself dominated in his household by an influence apart from his own, however healthy and high-minded that influence might prove."

"Harold! Harold!" cried Mrs. Elphinstone; and she leaned back laughing in her chair, near which I had seated myself on a sort of low, tufted stool. "Don't you *see*," pursued my cordial kinswoman, "that Olive herself would be dignifiedly prompt to resent any such sentinelship in the event of her marriage? *Now* she is complaisant enough; she accepts Roberta's affection, and even returns it with an ardour at once warm and sincere. But to let it play havoc hereafter with her matrimonial destiny! Ah, have you not gauged her better than that?"

"I've tried to gauge the excessive vehemence of your other niece."

"Oh, that will pass. Roberta thinks she will never marry."

"Apparently that she will never marry any one but Olive."

Mrs. Elphinstone laughed softly. "The girls will doubtless always remain friends. They will probably tell their children how they once worshipped one another."

"And meanwhile Olive, you think, will have become a wife?"

"Why not? There are three of these youths who now visit us—all of good familly, all what may be termed excellent matches—who are in love with her—at her feet, as one might say."

"I've noticed. But you forget: it's got abroad that she's an heiress."

"Bah! my dear Harold. These young gentlemen were her slaves last summer, when Edna and Angus were both alive."

"And offered themselves?"

"I don't suppose that they dared."

"She's very gracious, I've thought."

"And there it ends."

"Are you quite sure, my dear Mrs. Elphinstone?"

"As sure," said the amiable lady, suddenly laying her hand on my arm, "as that she is gracious to you with a decided difference."

"Oh, you forget," I said, "that we are cousins."

"I don't forget it," replied Mrs. Elphinstone, "I remember it quite well. But if Olive loves you—and I am almost certain, Harold, that these few days of your society have wrought upon her with strange enchantment—why should this bond of relationship forbid you from making her your wife? You might search the wide world and never find a more fitting one. Besides, to take her back to England as Mrs. Harold Mountstuart would have a meaning in it at once stately and poetic. The two heads of the house would then be joined in one."

I chose to waive the whole question by assuming an airily jocose mood, and was glad when Olive herself came and ended our converse. For the first time in my life I was appalled by my own crimes. The thought, "In what loathing would she hold me if she knew," cost secret suffering of untold violence. The idea that this girl should be willing to marry me, as her aunt had more than hinted, held hues at once delicious and horrifying. My feet thus far had walked among barren pathways, heedless of what harsh, hard soil might meet them, so that they led in safety to the goal of my greed and sin. But now suddenly before my sight gleamed a trembling flower, fair enough to have blossomed in gardens haunted by gods. To this ironic end, then, had I lived, casting insults at life! After all my silent but secure boastings, defeat, like a hidden tiger, had leaped upon me. To have been discovered, seized, imprisoned, threatened with the scaffold—all that would have brought rage and self-disgust in its wake. But here was such a far subtler and sharper punishment—to find that the stone I had believed my heart was beating warm and vital in my breast! The fearful pathos of my position was this:

I had ceased to be a monster, yet all the damnable acts of previous hours pressed upon me like a troup of scoffing demons, each one eager for its new and rightful welcome of anguish and despair. "Love has given you a conscience now," they cried.

So stormy was my mental state, after another day or two, that I feared some insane outburst might betray me. We visited the Falls one morning (a party of ten) and till evening did not return. This nearness to the tempestuous torrent brought me a transitory relief. The surge and riot of my own feelings were symbolled here. My associates, all gay and most of them young, knew Niagara by heart. I was the English stranger toward whom they looked for enthusiasm and wonder. An hour or so after midday we lunched at one of the large hotels, with some choice viands, and with champagne in rather copious accompaniment. At length I spoke without reserve of how the power and splendour of my new experience had affected me.

"You quite put our little company into good humour again," said a voice at my side, after luncheon was over and we were preparing to revisit "the height, the space, the gloom, the glory" of Niagara, in new aspects of loveliness or grandeur.

I turned, knowing before I turned that it was Roberta Sterling who spoke.

"Really," I now answered her, "it did not occur to me that our party was out of humour. But if that is the case, how did I manage to re-enliven them?"

"You ceased to show British stolidity about the Falls. You flattered their provincial pride."

I shrugged my shoulders, with a faint laugh. "Ah, you're too hard on your charming countrypeople. And if they have pride in the sublime spectacle of their rugged, magnificent river, why blame them on this account?"

"Oh, I don't blame them," said Roberta Sterling, with a crisp sedateness. "I was glad you woke up so. They expected it; they hoped for it, and you were good enough not to disappoint them. But you surprised *me*," the girl added.

I tried not to show the chagrin she roused. I could do nothing but stare and gnaw my lower lip.

Yet some reply was imperative with me. "Perhaps—well, yes, I'm *not* feeling in just as good health as when I first came to Pineland."

"That is unfortunate." She drew closer to me as she spoke, though almost imperceptibly closer. "There are one or two excellent physicians hereabouts, Mr. Mountstuart."

"Thanks ; I'm not ill enough to consult them."

"You *are* ill, then?" And herewith I somehow knew, by the very process of avoiding them, that her black eyes, oddly penetrant and yet slumberous, were at their former trick of pertinacious scrutiny. "Could your complaint be by any chance an emotional one?" she softly persisted.

"Emotional?" I echoed, and faced her with a desperate challenge in my looks that she may or may not have recognised there.

"Yes," she answered, calm and secure as ever. "I've fancied it might be that ; I've fancied so half because I'm a rather keen observer of the human countenance, and half because Aunt Lilian has told me of a certain proposed marriage."

"You are certainly a young lady of rather complicated motives," I said, with dry sarcasm, in a measure regaining equipoise.

"I have my depths, if you mean that," she parried, "both of conviction and of doubt."

"And your doubt tells you——?"

"That you're not at all the man to be Olive's husband."

"And your conviction tells you——?"

"That you care a great deal more for Olive—a very great deal more for her—than you did when you last saw her in England."

After a silence, during which I had striven to make my features appear unconcerned and inexpressive, "May I ask you," came my answer, "why you think me unfitted to marry your friend?"

"Because," said Roberta Sterling, "you could not make her happy."

I knew, then, that my eyes had angrily kindled. "Do you speak thus merely for the reason that you have allowed yourself to harbour against me some capricious prejudice."

"It is not capricious."

"It is prejudice, however?"

"You may call it so."

Here my laugh rang harsh and somewhat high. "Oh, I could call it worse names than that, if I wanted. I could call it the most unwarrantable interference, for example."

She lifted her small, dark head with defiant composure. "I've not interfered *yet*," she returned, as if with the tips of her lips.

"And—*shall* you interfere?"

"In case you sought to marry Olive?" She now bristled with antagonism. "Of course I shall!" she affirmed, the four words having an explosive effect, although she pronounced them with vocal mildness. But *I* had become far from mild now. She had waked in me much the same sort of hidden rage that the dead Edna had waked after Uncle Cecil's demise at Graydon Hall. But she was a very different species of foe from Edna. She had thrice the latter's brains, and thrice her scope of feeling, character, principle. I might execrate her as I pleased, but I could not help accepting and comprehending that she was a woman whose youth made the resolute forces of her mind and temperament all the more phenomenal.

"Very well," I said, with bitter sternness. "This means, I suppose, that we are to be at daggers drawn in the future?"

"At daggers drawn?" she repeated, every accent plainly hostile. "And your reply means that you *will* seek to marry Olive?"

"That is my affair," I returned, bluffly, sternly.

"Oh, I'll make it mine," she said, with an icy firmness; "be sure of that."

"Upon my word, I'm ready to be sure that you will do almost anything aggressive and violent."

As I stared into her face, now, with my own hardened most irately, she drew back from me in haughty disapprobation. "I read you perfectly. You think that you can carry matters quite over my head."

"You're truly the most amazing young person," I here retorted, with an open sneer. "You've been 'reading' me, as far as I can see, ever since I came to your aunt's house."

"True ; I have. And not to your credit."

I felt myself visibly tremble with wrath. "What do you know about me?" I queried, heatedly and with extreme fierceness, leaning toward her and even clinching one hand.

"I don't know anything," she replied, turning pale but not in the least flinching. "I don't *know* anything," she repeated. "I divine—I feel."

"You hate me, then?"

"I abhor you!"

She shuddered as she spoke the word. I felt myself her match while she thus astonishingly addressed me, and yet my concealed agitation was intense. "Ah," I mocked, "so you're a person with self-credited clairvoyant instincts, are you?"

"You can call it clairvoyance, if you please. I believe in clairvoyance, more or less, though I've never boasted of having any such power. Perhaps my love for Olive and that sense of guardianship which such love gives me, has caused the repulsion which I've just confessed. I didn't mean to confess it ; I only meant to let you know that I would not let my darling ever be your wife." For a moment her black eyes blazed upon me, and then they melted in tears. "You're a bad man," she went on, her voice low and breaking, but informed with an accusative stress, an inflexible obduracy to which no phrase that I could hit upon would give due describing tints. "You're bad to the core, and no one seems to see that you are, no one seems to pierce beyond the mask that you wear—no one but I! It isn't a thin mask, I grant ; it's thick, and it's worn with great art and grace—the art and grace of Belial himself. I don't know what you've done in your past life.

I imagine that whatever it was it has been done with consummate tact and skill. I may err horribly in this judgment of you. As I said, I didn't intend to express it openly; you somehow drew it forth, and here it is! I shall regret having spoken it—I shall suffer for my reckless candour, and all that. But one thing remains: *You shall not have my Olive!* Though you kill me, you shall not have her! There!"

She had been receding from me for a few seconds before the end of this faint-toned yet tremendously fervid speech. As the last word of it left her, she staggered backward, her eyes closing. She did not fall, however, and the firmness with which one of her hands grasped the ledge of the balcony told me that she was in no danger of actual swoon.

While I stood before her, doubtless white to the lips, and feeling myself drunk with fury and consternation intermixed, four or five of our party (men and girls together) came gaily forth upon the balcony.

"What is it?" "What's the matter with Miss Sterling?" called two of their voices in a breath.

"I don't know," came my quiet answer, incongruous to myself as though the breath of a zephyr had come from the mouth of a volcano. "The young lady was quite well till an instant ago. It's perhaps only a momentary illness."

"Right," said Roberta Sterling, opening her eyes, steadying her slender form, and bestowing a soft, fluttered laugh on the two young gentlemen who had sprung to her assistance. That one word of response seemed an answer directed solely at myself. "I'm—I'm perfectly recovered, thanks," were her next words, delivered with very slight delay.

"You've over-exerted yourself, Roberta, dear," said one of the ladies. "We're nearly all of us more tired than we should be at this early hour of the day." Here the speaker's gaze lighted on me. "Why, you look *ever* so pale and fatigued, Mr. Mountstuart," she added, with innocent frankness.

"Do I, really, Miss Ardilaun?" fell my clear-spoken

response. "I never felt better in my life. And I supposed it was the same with Miss Sterling till she suddenly became indisposed. She'd been weaving a little romance for me, and she told it with much dramatic force."

"Was it an Indian legend connected with these wondrous Falls of ours?" asked a pretty blonde who had just been holding a silver salts-bottle to the nostrils of Roberta.

"No," I returned, as I strolled quietly indoors, leaving the group on the balcony. "It was a fairy-tale, a striking but most impossible fairy-tale, which she made up entirely out of her own head. I forgave its contempt of truth because the adroitness of the narrator made it so effective."

And immediately after this I passed into the hotel, at once finding Olive, seated in the midst of several friends near the abandoned lunch-table. She gave me a bright smile as our glances met. I tried to return the smile, but felt that my effort was the forlornest failure.

CHAPTER XXI.

In spite of my bold parting shaft hurled at Roberta as I quitted the balcony, I was preyed upon by an excitement deep and dread. The remainder of that day is in memory like a backward look at some mass of fire-tinged vapour. I have a dim recollection of standing on Goat Island, so steadfast and yet so marvellously cinctured by certain death in the glassy sweep of water every side of it, and thinking with what speed one could slip to eternity from those green and rustic shores. Then I recall how the old murderous impulse dominated me masterfully for an instant as Roberta chanced to draw within a yard or two of what a sudden push might have made her grave. But nearly all the rest—goings hither and thither—remained for me an indeterminate blur. The sweet and blooming face of Olive, however, gleams most distinctly from even this dubious twilight. So, too, a brief talk that I held with her alone.

It was while the whole little party were returning on foot

to the hotel where we had lunched a few hours ago, and whence we were to take carriages homeward.

"May I walk with you on to the hotel?" I asked.

"Why, yes, dear Harold!" she smiled. "What a question! Let us walk on ahead a little quickly. The others will understand."

The early evening was a living poem. Groups of pines, dark as if chiselled from ebony, loomed against one of those sunsets which are cloudless pools of airy gold. Below us, glimpsed from the grassy and cedar-plumed escarpment near which we moved, the river swept along in its turbulence, foam-enscrolled. These were the tides that had so lately been hurled over the awful precipice beyond; and to see them now in their illumined speed and vigour was to fancy that they exulted and triumphed because of having survived that fearful leap and found below it an untrammelled progress toward the sea for which they yearned.

I recall saying something of this sort to Olive. And then, as if desiring to avoid some personal comment that might break from her, I went on, with a precipitation almost equal to that of the fleet current near which we walked: "Nature is so full of these analogies to our own human life. We see in its hundreds of moods just the same exercise of that blind force which leads, drives and hurries us all—onward, we know not whither."

"You should not call it a blind force," she answered; "You're too thoughtful, too finely cultured for that." But here her voice changed, and she went on, in a familiar, colloquial key: "My dear Harold, you have not seemed yourself this afternoon. I didn't notice it until an hour or two ago. You struck me as having grown strangely pale, and your manner had a most flurried sort of oddity. We've been apart nearly all the time, you know, but still, I couldn't help observing you."

"It's pleasant to hear that you couldn't help paying me that kindness, Olive."

"Why speak so ceremoniously? You must be sure——" And then she paused, colouring, though with her gaze still on my face.

"Sure that you're fond of me?" I asked, as if ending her incomplete sentence.

"Of course, yes." And now her eyes drooped. "As if you could doubt it, Harold!"

"I had reason not long ago to doubt it. I don't mean to-day. I refer to a talk I held lately with your aunt."

Her colour softly deepened. "Poor, dear Aunt Lilian! I'm so sorry she didn't come with us. And so she told you——?"

"That she believed you cared for me very much."

"Very much, Harold?" she faltered. "Why, yes. I—— Oh, you must know that I do!"

"Well enough to be my wife, Olive?"

"*Harold!*" She laid her hand on my arm, and her next words came with pell-mell swiftness. "Did Aunt Lilian tell you that I——? No, no, she couldn't have been so foolish!"

"Was it foolish, Olive?"

"Pray let us speak of something else."

"And forget what I've said? That is what your friend, Roberta Sterling, would like."

"Roberta Sterling!" she replied, with a dismayed start. "Why mention *her* name?"

"Because she would use strong efforts to keep you from marrying me, even if you wished to do so."

"Roberta?" she murmured, in a self-questioning way. "Oh, I recollect. She——" And here my cousin stopped short.

"You need not finish," I said. "It's clear to me that you would have told me of her dislike."

"Dislike, Harold!"

"Hate—loathing—abomination!" I exclaimed. "And of a sort, Olive, that clothes itself in the most atrocious insult! . . . Roberta knows," I hurried on, "that it would please your aunt if you became my wife. She has guessed, too, that I love you, and would infinitely rejoice if you consented to take that step. But she has chosen to disapprove it."

"To disapprove it? Roberta has no right——"

"Ah, don't question her right!" I burst in, with great impetuosity and a sort of wild irony as well. "She has the right to claim you as her own property—to say whom you shall or shall not marry—to tell me that it it cost her life itself I shall never possess you. Surely, my dear Olive, in her splendid proprietorship she's a friend to be proud of! She doesn't propose to irk you by consulting your own opinions or inclinations. You should be very grateful, too, for her really superb gift of clairvoyance."

"Harold," cried my hearer, "what are you telling me?"

I laughed with an abandonment of bitterness.

"Has she kept it thus far reserved from your ken, my dear cousin? I've been less fortunate, I assure you. I've received from her the most startling proof of its existence."

"What *do* you mean, Harold?"

"Miss Roberta dropped into a sort of sibylline trance, there at the hotel, shortly after luncheon. She suddenly announced to me that I should not have you—that though I killed her I should not have you—that I am bad to the core. I feel angry at such audacity of interference, officiousness, coarseness. Tell me, Olive, am I wrong in feeling thus?"

"Wrong?" she repeated; and then I saw that her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks aflame. "You are wholly right, Harold! It's too shameless in Roberta to behave like this. She's been my friend, but I almost feel like telling her, the next time we meet, that she's my friend no longer." And here Olive paused for just a second, her eyes closing. "It's an infamy, Harold—it's an outrage! I will not endure it from Roberta. I'm glad you told me this."

"And you'll give up one friend for another, Olive?"

"I'll—I'll give up a false friend for a true one, Harold! That I believe you—that I am sure you *are!*"

"No, Olive, you're wrong!"

"Wrong?" she quavered, almost sighing the word rather than speaking it.

"Yes, I'm your friend; but I'm more."

"More, Harold? Yes, you've told me—you've already told me——"

"That I love you!—that I want you for my wife! And your answer? Give it me, Olive, or must Roberta Sterling make it for you?"

"No." At this point she paused, and so did I. "Roberta Sterling," pursued Olive, with her gaze full upon mine, "is nothing to me. You, Harold, are everything to me. I love you, and I will be your wife."

After this the retrospective shadow reoccurs. We took carriages from the hotel to Pineland and thereabouts. Dinner was served soon after our arrival. I went to my room and began to dress. I recall hearing my servant, whom I had summoned, ask me a certain question. Then I recall that I told him to leave me, and finished my toilet alone.

Always priding myself upon the iron firmness of my nerves, I had rarely resorted to stimulants of whatever kind. But now, recollecting that a flask of brandy was somewhere among my traps, I secured it and drank nearly all its contents. This ample draught proved steadying.

Olive loved me. This knowledge burned with cheer. I had surely taken the safest of all courses in trying to spike Roberta Sterling's guns. But always those words, "You're bad to the core," kept ringing through my brain. I surveyed myself in my dressing-mirror before leaving my apartments. Was I not now victor in place of victim? Had I not crushed this enemy by the prompt and headlong plan I had employed? And I had suffered merely because her random ravings had hit on actual truth. *She could not have known what she declared.* How was this possible?

I felt quite calm when I at last went downstairs that evening. One of the messages had come from Olive. I expected to meet her, and I was not surprised when she sprang toward me as I entered the large, quiet, lamplit drawing-room.

"Harold! you've been ill. Are you better?"

"I'm well enough to be here," I smiled. At a little distance off I saw Mrs. Elphinstone. She was seated beside a rosy-shaded lamp. She rose on seeing me and advanced toward where I stood, with Olive clasping my hand and

peering into my face—a face which I well knew was ravaged by the torments through which I had passed and was still passing.

"My dear Harold!" she said. And then, for a brief space, we stood together.

I broke the silence with a faint laugh. "Where," I quickly added, "is my grand judge and accuser?"

Olive and her aunt exchanged rapid, meaning glances. Mrs. Elphinstone spoke.

"Roberta is ill, Harold."

"Ill?" I repeated, with sarcasm.

"Oh, Harold, Harold!" cried Mrs. Elphinstone, "how fearfully she has insulted you! I wonder you can even come down to us as you have done! It is too terrible!" And suddenly, but with a most tender violence, Olive's aunt threw her arms about my neck and kissed me upon either cheek. That kiss proved invigorating. It seemed like the death-blow of Roberta Sterling's antagonism.

"Then I am Olive's accepted suitor?" I said; and instantly my cousin came to me.

As I clasped my arms about her I turned and looked steadily for a second at Mrs. Elphinstone.

"You see!" I exclaimed. "We are betrothed. Olive consents. It's for you, Mrs. Elphinstone, to seal our engagement."

"Which I do with all my soul!" said the lady, kissing us both.

Olive unquestionably loved me, but still I somehow began to feel the influence of Roberta in her next words. "You can't blame me for being loyal to my friend, Harold?"

"Blame you! My darling Olive!"

"What can I say?"

"You can say so much! You can say that you will never speak again to the woman who has maligned me."

We were walking in the pine-grove that gave upon the great cliff overlooking the river. A summer-house hung there, like some great insect that had caught its antennæ on the rocks and grasses. We entered, and sank side by side on one of the benches.

"My dearest," I said, "do I ask too much of you?"

"You ask a great deal," she answered. We could hear the soft yet sonorous cry of the rapids below us and catch pale gleams from their frothy swirls and eddies. A delicious aroma floated to us from the pines that towered near by.

I took Olive's hand and pressed it to my lips. She sought to withdraw her hand. I retained it, clingingly. "Olive," I protested, "you surely love me better than you love this malignant woman!"

She rose. "What are you saying, Harold? Roberta malignant? No, no!"

"Olive," I exclaimed, rising also, "can it be possible that you believe in her hideous distrust of me?"

Olive's eyes flashed. "Of course I do not!" she cried. "She was like a madwoman when she spoke to you as she did, Harold. She's been ill ever since. She longs to apologise for the absurdity of her tirade. Again and again she has told me that it was in execrable taste."

I nodded. "Who can deny that? But how does it alter my case? She must have meant what she said. If she had not meant it, dear Olive, she would not have said it."

Olive laid her hand in mine. "Harold, will you not forgive her?"

"Good heavens! Forgive her for what? For having told what she evidently must have believed the truth? Pardon would here be almost ridiculous."

"I know, Harold—I know! But for this reason your mercy will be all the more charming."

"Oh," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "we need not argue it. I will do anything you might ask merely because you asked it." And in the sweet gloom of the pines I leaned my lips to hers.

Mrs. Elphinstone continued enchanted at our engagement. She said to me, after dinner that same evening: "It is perfect, Harold. Nothing could be more admirably ordered. Now Olive will go back to her inheritance with a husband after my own heart. Indeed, it will be almost as if you were co-heirs."

"I seem to have thought so little of Olive as an heiress!"

came my answer. "And yet that sounds absurd when I recall that I came here to tell her that she was mistress of Graydon Hall."

"I understand you thoroughly, Harold." At this point my hostess gave me her blandest smile. "You'll consent, then, to have the marriage ceremony performed here?"

"I should prefer such a plan, dear Mrs. Elphinstone."

My companion's eyes began to dance. "How delightful!" Then her face clouded a little, and her voice broke. "Harold, will you consent to see Roberta this evening?"

"Oh, yes," I returned. "Olive's request has been law to me—why not?"

"Thanks—thanks. Wait here, will you not? She will join you presently. You will find her very remorseful."

But I soon found that she was nothing of the sort. Perhaps she had chosen to appear so before Mrs. Elphinstone and her friend, but she had no such choice as regarded my own unshared presence.

"I suppose I must make you," she began, "a very elaborate apology."

"'Must,' Miss Sterling? Then the action on your part is not natural, but forced?"

"Why not say it is forced by good breeding?" she returned, a little piquedly.

"Good breeding?" I smiled. "Is not that a rather flippant name for the horridly grave things you said to me?" Then my smile vanished, and I pursued, with cold challenge:

"Or do you wish that I should show you mercy where you undoubtedly deserve none?"

She bit her lip and tossed her head. "I've thought nothing whatever about mercy."

"Oh, you haven't? Then you have played the hypocrite to Olive and your aunt?"

"Playing the hypocrite," she retorted, "is just the part to which I am unequal. I thought that I *could* play such a part, but I now see my mistake."

Her features were working; she had begun to knot and twist a small handkerchief that she had drawn from the

pocket of her gown, between the feverish fingers of both hands.

"Then I am to understand, Miss Sterling," was my slow reply, "that you do not in the least repent your behaviour to me?"

She gave an impatient yet measured sigh, that seemed to force itself from between half-clenched lips.

"Yes—yes," she answered. "I repent it very much. I should never have spoken to you as I did. Haven't they told you? I'm sorry; I'm sorry. Will not this suffice?"

"Anything will 'suffice,' as you term it," I frowned. "Anything or nothing. What you've just stated has a most perfunctory ring. You have evidently fancied you could propitiate me in some absurd way. But you've erred in supposing that I desired to be propitiated. You've kept away from the family circle for quite a while, and now you perhaps wish to rejoin it. That is wholly your own affair. Mrs. Elphinstone may have insisted that you shall not do so unless you acknowledge my new position as the betrothed husband of my cousin Olive, but I demand from you no such concession. You may act precisely as your own mood dictates. I am soon to marry Olive, much as I feel certain that you dislike the step. Both Olive and her aunt are with me, and your farcical disapproval may wreak itself in all sorts of heroic scowls. I don't just see what more you can do, but possibly your curious hate, so illogical and unsolicited, can answer that question far better than I."

Without permitting her to respond, I at once passed from the room. The evening was warm, and the door of the great wide lower hall was open. I got my hat from the table whereon I had not long ago flung it, and soon was pacing the carriage-walk in front of the house.

Somewhere beyond the proud pines of the lawn there was enough moonlight to make the stateliness of this vernal yet northern nature spectrally visible. It awed me now, as all its more lordly moods must hereafter do. For behind nature love had taught me to behold and realise a God, just as it had taught me to behold and realise behind the in-

visible mystery of my own human (or, if you please, contra-human) nature, the immensity of my own vileness.

Secretly I almost revered this Roberta Sterling now, despite my late passionate denunciations of her. There was something glorious in her inability to bend before a being whom strange yet self-trusted native instincts had prompted her to despise and shun. What a sarcasm on all my past popularity and winsomeness! I felt conscious now that she would never yield. She was in spirit like one of these stalwart pines that rose before me in the faint silver of the night, telling how storms could bend them but could not break. And that vague roar from the huge-tumbling surge, their imperial neighbour—it seemed half like the threat of an offended deity, half like the accusing voice of this frail girl's defiance.

In one way I had surely conquered her. She was powerless, however obstinate. But if she persisted in guarding and watching Olive after the marriage which she could not prevent, how intolerable would be the mere fact of this affectionate surveillance, even if it never intruded upon me by one further assaulting charge!

In the dimness I soon heard a step, and Olive hurried toward me. "Harold!" she said, grasping my arm and peering into my face, "I've just heard from Roberta herself that she *broke down at the last moment.* Oh, this has to me a most shocking meaning! So indeed it has to Aunt Lilian! We've all three just gone through a stormy scene. I've told Roberta that I will not be present at our little garden-party to-morrow afternoon if she presumes to join ourselves and our guests. I've also told her that we're strangers from this time forth. Never, never have I seen Aunt Lilian so angry. She declares that she will not permit Roberta to live with her a week longer. The girl has another aunt at Quebec—a Mrs. Arrowdale—to whom she can go if she desires. Mrs. Arrowdale lost a beloved and only daughter two or three years ago, and desires, earnestly desires, that Roberta shall take her place. This would surely be her wisest step now. Pineland must hereafter fail signally, I should say, to divert her."

The garden-party mentioned by Olive scarcely deserved so august a name. It was only a kind of congratulatory meeting, and those who attended it nearly all brought some floral offering to the newly-betrothed. With a few additions they were the party which had accompanied us on the day of our visit to the Falls. It was a lovely afternoon, and by about three o'clock we all left the fragrant lawns for a luncheon, at which sparkled some excellent wine, and a few toasts hardly less brilliant. My own speech had for my own ears a cheerless and perfunctory ring. But others appeared to view it differently, and among these were Olive and her aunt.

A number of questions were asked concerning the absence of Roberta. It was agreed between us three that we should say an acute but not serious illness had prevented her from appearing.

"She is always so well," I heard a feminine voice declare to Mrs. Elphinstone. "Can't I go upstairs and have a short condoling chat with her?"

An intervention of other gay voices drowned for my ears Mrs. Elphinstone's reply. But I felt certain that it was a reply in the negative.

After luncheon we again went out of doors. By this time the breeze had freshened a little, but not too tinglingly for comfort. Olive and I were strolling with one another almost before we became aware of our semi-solitude. Perhaps our companions left us alone together with the sympathy that lovers rouse in their associates.

Presently we had drawn close to the summer-house on the cliff. But we did not enter it. We stood near the edge of the cliff itself, and Olive caught with one hand a cedar log that helped to make the open-work wall of the little pavilion. But a few yards beyond her yawned the undefended abyss. While she paused thus, with her head turned toward me in a sweet, half-indolent, conversational mood, I suddenly said: "Olive, dearest—be careful."

"Careful?"

"There's that awful gulf so close to you."

She laughed, but did not change her posture. She had

on a black gown, with loose-flowing sleeves, that I had thought exquisitely becoming, and had so assured her a few hours ago. Now that the dimness of the early May evening had begun to gather, her form, even close to mine as it was, had taken half obscure outlines. But her pearly throat and profile were still delicately distinct. "I'm so used to that 'awful gulf,' as you call it, Harold," she said.

"Ah, yes; but a step or two, and you might realise, dearest, how little used to it you really are. A fall would surely be fatal."

"Fatal! Good heavens! I should say it would. Even if one could swim after dropping down those hundreds of feet towards the river, that would avail nothing. The rocks bulge out at their base and would dash one to death."

I drew her away with strong though tender force. Then, as our eyes met in the slowly-thickening dusk, "Olive," I questioned, "why did you speak to me like that?"

Her face hardened as I had never seen it harden before. "Shall I tell you why, Harold? I was thinking that if Roberta Sterling really cares for me in the insensate and lunatic way she professes to care—that if she is really crazed enough to feel unable to live without me now I have refused further acquaintanceship with her, such an end as a leap from this cliff would be dreadfully yet finely fitting!"

"Olive!" I exclaimed, drawing her closer to me in pretended dismay. "How *can* you think so repellent a thought?"

Her lips touched mine, and then she softly smote me on the cheek. "Harold! You don't think I *meant* it! You absolutely good people never have evil thoughts. We faulty ones occasionally do. Forgive me!" And this time her lips did more than merely touch my own.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SICKENING sense of hypocrisy—a sense never dreamed of in former days—now assailed me. I was certain that I grew ashen pale, and I thanked the faint light for not letting her perceive it.

"Pray tell me," I asked, "why has your aunt let this stretch of cliff remain so unguarded?"

"Why, my dear Harold? For the most absurd of all reasons—that she has been intending to have a wall put there for the past four years. Had the building of this wall been something less easy than it is, she might long ago have had it reared. Still, we residents here at Pineland never think of the danger; we are so used, you know, to the nearness of the cliff; and then the roar of the Falls for ever makes a kind of warning music for us."

"But the danger to others——"

"Oh, yes. Aunt *must* not continue forgetting this thing which is at her very doorstep, while she is thoughtfulness, attentiveness itself to many another thing far remoter and less important."

Just then we heard laughing voices, and the next minute a group of girls and young men came asking us to join them at tennis. Then others arrived, protesting that it was too late, and that the darkness would overtake us before the end of our first game. Soon Olive was borne from me by the 'yeas,' as it were, and I, who had sided with the 'nays,' felt that I was no doubt expected to join this latter throng. But I did not join it, and soon found that its members had been either kindly or careless enough to let me linger in the same spot where Olive and myself had lately stood.

"And so," I began to muse, "the offensive presence of Roberta will soon be eliminated from all my future experience. How delightful if she should consent to leave Pineland without ever looking on me again!"

Suddenly a feminine shape glided from a covert of low evergreens, and paused within a few paces from the spot where I had chosen to linger. It was clad in a dark gown, which the diminished light made resemble Olive's attire of to-day. But almost instantly I recognised Roberta Sterling.

"You're surprised to see me?" came her prompt words, low and clear.

"You've ceased to surprise me by anything you may do," I returned. And veering away from her, I was about to depart without another word.

"Stay, will you not?" she called.

I obeyed this demand, which was touched with a tone of entreaty, wild yet faint.

"Well?" I said, with excessive coldness, coming near to her once more.

"You've conquered, Harold Mountstuart," she began, her black eyes burningly radiant as they swept my face.

"Conquered? What do you mean by that? You chose——"

"I chose to hate you," she broke in; "I strove to discipline, to punish myself for having felt that hate; but the effort has been impossible. I could not bow before one whom I felt to be base. I feel it now more than ever before. They mean to cast me off—Aunt Elphinstone and my darling Olive. Well, let them. I will go—I must go. But I will devote my life to a single effort hereafter."

"And that effort will be?"

"*Trying to find you out!*" she gasped, with intense, tumultuous bitterness.

Changed as I now had become, her quick-hissed sentence pierced me with affright. How, I queried, at feverish speed, could this relentless young persecutor "find me out"? Memory swept over all my abominable past. Had I left traces, clues? *Might I not, after all, have left them?* This thought staggered me, though I said with glacial repose:

"You *are* mad. Your former friend, Olive, thinks there's a strong chance of your being mad, and I believe she is right."

"My former friend!" she retorted, with sullen savagery. "Ah, I'll make her my friend again, and my repentant one, even after she's married you, unless there's no grain of truth in these monitions, these repulsions that torment me!"

"So, then. You've sought me to threaten again?"

"No; I've sought you to warn."

"Indeed? And against what, pray!"

"Against becoming Olive's husband."

Once more I was about to leave her, turning on my heel.

But though I remained with averted face, her voice, not loudened yet strongly penetrant, detained me.

"If there's a God in heaven, Harold Mountstuart—and I believe there is, as I believe you are utterly sinful and cruel—He will help me to discover your wickedness. I'll not be so powerless in this purpose of mine, either. I've an income that will bring me to England and let me pursue my search there. I'll spend every shilling of my whole small fortune before I'll give up that search. There must be some clue, though I should find that all your world spoke well of you, that all your dealings with your fellows had been seemingly fine and noble. Now marry Olive, if you please, but remember that I shall not merely watch and wait—I shall pry and peer and weigh and sift. I shall be inexorable as the Fate of which some strange and hidden knowledge makes me sure that I'm the appointed agent. *And I shall succeed;* be certain of that. You doubt now, perhaps, but you'll doubt no longer when I've gone to my Olive—my dearly-loved Olive, who has repelled and spurned me—and have said to her, 'See—listen. Here are proofs. He *is* bad to the core, just as I said he was. Ah, Olive, though you're his wife, though you've made him your idol and me your scorn—grant in the name of justice that I was right!'"

I felt the cold sweat glisten on my brow as I moved rapidly away from her. Perhaps all the fierceness of her antipathy was the merest fortuitous fanaticism. Hundreds, thousands, will claim that it was. But to me, in this miserable hour, it teemed with a sort of holy monitory wrath.

And yet it did not keep my old wickedness from cropping out with fearfully vengeful force. Love might have changed me, but below the sudden results of this change still slept the moral monster of the past. I remembered what Olive had said to me about a leap from yonder cliff being the fit end of a friendship at once so crazed and so rejected as Roberta's.

For a long time, doubtless, I lingered amid the new cluster of pines where my steps had halted. The twilight deepened round me; the breeze in the huge fringy boughs

overhead whispered insidious temptations; the far-away roar of Niagara seemed to urge and exhort me. I had dared so much; why should I not make one more bold push and clear from my pathway this last loathed impediment? Was I so sure, indeed, that it might not prove cumbrous besides? What if this implacable girl really did contrive to weave about me a net of ignominy?

The light had by this time very markedly faded. I wondered if my tormentor had gone from the cliff-edge. If she had not gone, what a chance I might have to make an end of all future stings and stabs, vigils and ambuscades!

Gliding back toward the summer-house, I soon came in full view of a dark figure stationed just where Olive had stood only so brief a time ago. The figure had caught with one hand a slim cedar log which helped to make the side of the little structure nearest her. I saw the attitude of Olive repeated, except that now the head of the figure was more drooped than hers had been. Of course the light was much obscurer now than when the woman I worshipped had paused there like this. And yet, though pierced with the resemblance, I never suspected what really had occurred. That Roberta should so look like my beloved Olive nerved me with a new incentive of aversion and rage.

"They will believe she has killed herself," I thought. "They will never dream that *I* had a hand in her death—never!"

I stole nearer. The edge of the abyss could not have been more than two yards from where she stood. No faintest suspicion entered my brain that Olive might have separated herself from the band of tennis-players, might have returned here, hoping to find me in the same spot where we had lately parted, and unconsciously might have resumed the same posture which had struck me as so graceful while we had last talked together.

And yet all this must have been true! Roberta had gone away, and I believed the form I saw was hers! Oh, traitorous and inveigling twilight! I crept forward, and then——

While she shrieked, and while her shape toppled with

upflung arms at the verge of the cliff, her face in the gloom half turned to me. Then it vanished. She was Olive! She had gone down to her death! My purpose was fulfilled. I had murdered my way through the whole seven—and to what end?

Madness. When they found me, wandering in almost utter darkness among the pines, I was completely crazed. And yet I know that I told them how I had flung Olive from the cliff, mistaking her for Roberta, and I know also that with a frenzied but lucid volubility I poured forth the whole history of my past crimes, not sparing any detail that would damn me as the arch-assassin of my era. From the killing of Uncle Malcolm in his fire-enswathed bed to the hurling of Olive down upon those crags where they must have discovered her dead and bleeding, I swept through the whole infamous chronicle.

"Give me my punishment!" I cried, at the end. "God demands it—I demand it—the whole civilised world will demand it!"

Then I must have fainted, for a long blank follows.

Afterward came consciousness again, in which I seemed to be wandering through the most mournful and anguish-haunted crypts of hell, yet could not prevail upon one of its grim sentinels or wardens to accord me even a tithe of the torture viewed in glassy eyes and gasping lips on every side of me. The wildest ravings must have ensued. Forms like shadows, but having the muscles of brawny men, fought with me till I lay exhausted and panting. For days this appeared to go on, the struggles repeating themselves, the prostration ending them. Then I had a sense of being borne somewhere. It was here, to this famous and beautiful asylum for the insane. After months of alternate progress and relapse, I have at last been pronounced harmless and even convalescent.

But here, at the final page of my confessions, their strangest part must be recorded. *No one believes that I am the guilty wretch I have declared myself.* All my crimes, as far as I can learn from my physicians and keepers, are the product of my own diseased imagination. This, as I need

scarcely add, is the most ridiculous and amazing case of popular delusion. And yet I can understand that it should exist. The infernal art of my villainy has been too consummately skilful. The chain of deception was wrought of such infrangible links while I constructed it that now even my own repentant efforts cannot tear these links apart.

Yet I have written all that herein lies legible, with the curious but fervent hope of convincing some reader whose eye may chance upon it that I am deserving of the expiation which I so deeply crave. That expiation—death upon the scaffold—would bring my soul infinite peace if I were told this hour that to-morrow it must befall me. What I find so frightfully hard to bear is the thought that I must live on unpunished, harassed night and day by the ghostly yet almost tangible presences of those whom my giant selfishness dared so darkly to harm!

THE EPILOGUE.

FANSHAWE had read the manuscript with intense interest and unconscious speed. He looked up from it with a start; with a second start he glanced about him. For a moment to his confused mind the pretty vine-wreathed arbour in which he sat seemed to be that which overhung the cliff at Pineland; for a moment the soft symphonies of breezes in elms and chestnuts had all the plaintive rhythm of those in Mrs. Elphinstone's Canadian firs.

Presently the young man looked at his watch, rising. Nearly two hours had passed. Could his uncle have deserted him?

"My dear Charley!"

The words went with an earnest handshake. Dr. Theobald had hurried down the little shady path beside the arbour, and had stopped before his nephew in evident embarrassment and regret.

"I'm so very sorry to have stayed away all this time, my dear boy! But the most unexpected case has been brought

into the asylum—a violent one, needing untold attention and care. Then, on the top of that, came a sudden summons——"

"Don't make another excuse, Uncle Alfred," Fanshawe broke in. "You arrived, after all, at the most opportune time." And he handed his kinsman the manuscript which he had been so avidly perusing.

Dr. Theobald took the packet of close-written pages. "You're rather pale, my boy," he said. "Has anything happened to distress you?"

"*That* has happened, Uncle Alfred. I mean, Harold Mountstuart has been here and given me the story of his life to read."

"Harold Mountstuart?" muttered Dr. Theobald, with an odd, bewildered stare at the young speaker. Soon he bent his look upon the manuscript, turning over its leaves, lingeringly at first, and then with greater speed.

While he was thus engaged, Fanshawe, keenly watching him, at length spoke, and with eager heat.

"Oh, uncle, this Harold Mountstuart is surely sane *now*, whatever he may have been when he first came within these walls. I think that horrible autobiography of his incontestably proves it. He has written the whole dreadful thing here, and he has implored me to have him treated as the responsible criminal whom this confession so clearly declares him!"

For several seconds, after Fanshawe had ended, Dr. Theobald continued his scrutiny of the collected sheets which he held. Then, lifting his gaze to that of Fanshawe, he said, with mingled sadness and humour: "I can quite see, Charles, why you have failed to be bored during my long desertion of you. What you have read as the autobiography of Harold Mountstuart is merely a new novel by that same Fleming Lancewood, the demented novelist, whose residence here you mentioned to me just before we parted."

"A—a new novel by Fleming Lancewood!" faltered Fanshawe. "But this is the work of a very different person! It is the history of a life reeking with depravity, and it has been written by Harold Mountstuart!"

Dr. Theobald laid a hand on the shoulder of his nephew. "Charley, you've been fooled by a very able deceiver—scarcely less so because that brilliant brain which he once possessed is now no longer in the glory of its powers. Do you recall how I lately told you that with such experts at detection as we harbour in this asylum sanity is just as hard to conceal as *in*sanity? Well, mark the verification of what I averred! There's no such man here as Harold Mountstuart. His real name is Fleming Lancewood. This is the third piece of fiction which he has composed since he came into our keeping, and in each he has believed himself some other being and the perpetrator of a series of secret crimes. I'm rather of the opinion that this work is thus far his best. We let him write two or three hours each day, when the effort seems to be spontaneous and attended with no fatigue. We believe that in this way his fine semi-shattered intellect may possibly right itself, or at least may not contract for itself the slightest retardment to recovery."

By this time Fanshawe had receded aghast from the quiet presence of his uncle.

"Good heavens!" he murmured. And then he gave a quick, nervous laugh, trying to make it go with a real and natural smile. "Well," he proceeded, after a minute or two of astounded silence, "I can only say this, Uncle Alfred: I'm a greater admirer of Fleming Lancewood's genius (God help him, poor fellow!) than I ever was before!"

"The instant I find him really sane again," said Dr. Theobald, "I'll tell him your flattering verdict."

"And—and *will* he ever be sane again?"

"It still is doubtful. We're debating as to whether we'd best let him go on writing. It seemed an almost mechanical affair with him, at first; but latterly we've observed that it is attended with certain exciting results."

Fanshawe began to gnaw his lips, and two tears glittered unshed in his honest, limpid eyes.

"But if he should die insane, uncle? What then will become of such literature as this?—for literature it certainly is, however revolting, horrifying in its theme."

"I hadn't thought about that—I really hadn't thought

about it," replied Dr. Theobald. And he lifted the manuscript in both hands, with a caressing sort of melancholy. "Perhaps," he added, giving Fanshawe a sudden kindly and distinctive glance, "we can prevail on his kindred to let you become his literary executor, and overhaul whatever work he may have done here, publishing or suppressing as you please."

"I should like such an office!" exclaimed Fanshawe, with enthusiasm. "I should like it above all things. And I should certainly *not* suppress," he continued, "this 'Story of Harold Mountstuart's Life.'"

"It's not so thoroughly horrible, then?"

"It's very horrible; but it's not mere ghastliness and boogabooism. There's a meaning behind it."

"What sort of meaning?"

Fanshawe mused for a moment. Then, with solemnity, he said: "The bitter and terrible one that all great popular spiritual and intellectual advancement necessitates ruin and death to a certain minority. Harold Mountstuart is a voice that speaks for the minority, and with language of mighty despair!"

THE END.

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